
RHAEGAR
AZARINTH HEALER
BOOK SEVEN
PORTAL BOOKS

AZARINTH HEALER

Book Seven

RHAEGAR



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The story so far

Ilea joined up with Elfie and the Cerithil Hunters, met and survived an encounter with one of the elven Monarchs, and finally discovered the Taleen capital of Iz. Next, Ilea took a break to visit the former territories of Baralia, attended a ball, and left for the north after a difficult talk with Michael, the blood mage who had fought alongside her, Felicia, and Hector in Erendar.

Soon after, she received news from the Meadow. Iana and Christopher, the enchanters who had been working on figuring out the Taleen teleportation technology, had had a breakthrough. They had found a way around the Taleen security and were now able to access the Taleen network and map out the available teleportation nodes. This allowed Ilea to finally pursue and find the missing member of her team: Kyrian.

She, Feyrair, Iana, and Christopher teleported to the Krahen Isles, the location Kyrian had been transported to during their battle with Arthur Redleaf.

He had survived on the island on his own, and not just that. He had hunted and explored, improving his magic in an attempt to find a way off the dangerous isles. Kyrian had also adopted a few soul magic birds. And now he finally had a way back.

Reunited once more, Ilea and Feyrair received a tour of the isles and discovered something they had been looking for: a new hunting ground for her to push for level five hundred and, hopefully, a new set of evolutions.

It took a while, and a lot of dead Wyverns, Rubble Guardians, and even a Wyrm, but when Ilea reached the threshold of five hundred, her Azarinth and Ash Classes evolved, vastly improving both her overall power and many of her skills and magics.

She took a bit of time testing her new moves, but was soon looking forward to showing off her newly evolved Classes and abilities. Teleporting back to her home south of Ravenhall, she was excited to set down her newly acquired teleportation anchor in the Meadow's domain.

To be able to visit and annoy the powerful tree whenever she feels like it…

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ONE

Enhance!

Ilea looked at the cliffside rising above her and smiled, feeling the endless mana flowing through her, enhancing every muscle, tendon, and even bone in her body. She felt heavy too, but in the way she imagined a car would feel if it evolved into a tank.

Her ashen limbs anchored her to the stone cliff face, keeping her steady against the steep wall of rock as she charged up Archon Strike in her right fist.

Hmm, maybe I should start a little lighter.

She dismissed the spell and simply struck the stone with her uncharged Archon Strike, the spell's magical energy converted into pure physical damage potential. Her arm seemed to vibrate before her fist came down, a loud boom filling the air as her fist dug into the stone, a wave of force sending chunks and pebbles down into the ocean below.

"Yeah. Yes! That feels so fucking good."

Instead of mana intrusion, her skills allowed her to convert the power of Archon Strike into purely physical strength, if she so desired. Her body still had to handle the impacts, though.

Light bruises from that. That's quite a fucking punch. I might actually need to heal myself if I use this with more than a thousand mana.

She smiled to herself.

I can't wait to try this against something able to take a full-strength punch.

Ilea spread her wings, taking her up and toward the valleys leading to Ravenhall, whistling to herself all the while.

Still have some stat points.

She put them into Intelligence.

She checked one of the new skills she was excited to try out. Ravenhall would be a good place for it.

Monstrous – lvl 1
You have achieved level 500, reaching the realm of true monstrosity. Those of your kind may not find it easy to accept your newfound nature. You can choose to mask your power to those considerably weaker than you [250 levels below your highest Class level]. Specialized abilities or enhanced Identification may breach this ability.

So everyone above two fifty will know my real level? That's hardly anyone…

Wait. If this skill exists, I might have met some really fucking powerful humans already. Hmm.

No, I think I would've noticed. Or would I? Better trust my gut from now on.

* * *

The short flight was uneventful, and she quickly landed in the fields outside Ravenhall.

Ilea tried to suppress her smile when she entered the city with simple leather armor and a hood covering some of her hair and face. She would still be identified as a pretty high-level battle healer, but at this point, she could probably pass as a Shadow or one of the Sentinels. If she had walked through the main gates with her three marks visible, there would have been a lot of attention.

She stretched when she reached the first square in the city, smiling to herself.

I'm level 500. And nobody knows.

She visited Trian first, but to her disappointment, he wasn't particularly fazed by her advancement.

“Congratulations,” he said, pouring himself a cup of tea and raising an eyebrow her way. “Tea?”

“I’d love a cup,” she said, displacing the one he held into her hand when he suggested she take it.

“Such useful abilities,” he murmured.

“I would have expected more of a reaction.”

He smiled. “Well, I guess you kind of get used to it. And at this point, you’re far beyond what I’m familiar with, so I can’t exactly put it into context, can I? But I’m glad that you’re alive and that feats like that are possible. It means the Sentinels can reach the same heights.”

“That would be cool. But also, am I just some kind of Sentinel prototype to you?”

He shrugged slightly. “Let’s just say you’re leading by example. And we all appreciate that.”

She laughed, and he smiled in response.

“Kyrian is still alive?” he asked.

“He is, yes. Training with Fey and Neiphato,” Ilea said.

“The Elves, yes,” Trian said, sipping from his own cup. “So what kind of upgrades did you get?”

“A bunch. A shit ton more mana for one. Oh, and I literally can’t age anymore.”

He laughed. “You’re the first immortal I’ve met. I expected more, to be honest.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I can also teleport around now, the third-tier long-range kind. I’m very excited about that. Three locations.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Anywhere?”

She nodded. “I think so, yes.”

“That’s… yeah… that’s pretty big. Where are you planning to put them? I assume you can choose?”

“I can choose, and I can switch them around too, just not very quickly. I’ll keep one in my house, one will be on the Krahen Isles, and I’ll set the last one in the Meadow’s domain.”

“You’d be able to teleport people as well?”

“I can, and I’m sure I will.”

He seemed lost in thought for a moment and nodded to himself. “I’ve got some ideas already. So, you just came to show off your fancy new three marks? Or was there something else?”

“No. That was the main thing.” As she sipped her tea, the two made eye contact. “How are the Sentinels doing? How many are Hunters already?”

“Changing the subject. Well, I suppose I’d probably want to show off too if I’d gotten to five hundred.” He summoned a book and leafed through it. “Twenty-three students are Hunters, between level two and three hundred. Eighty-four are Medics, between one and two hundred. The other forty-seven are Apprentices, so below one hundred.”

“That many already… What’s the rank for above three hundred? Gael must be getting close, I’d wager.”

“Not quite. His growth has slowed down considerably in the past few months. He’s been primarily taking jobs in and around Baralia’s old lands. Few of the monsters there provide enough danger to get him higher. A good thing too. I think he needs experience more than levels right now, lest he dies to the first really dangerous thing he comes across,” Trian said. “The rank after three hundred is Veteran.”

“And after that?” Ilea asked with a slight grin.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. I assume you won’t be staying for long?”

“I didn’t plan to, but once I’ve set the anchor in the north, well, I can visit anytime, so just send me a message. Ten words or less.”

I already love the idea. Just teleporting around the world, visiting my friends wherever they are, as long as they’re in one of three specific locations.

* * *

The journey north was simple, but it took a while. At first, Ilea had planned to really take in the sights and the experience one last time, but as the hours of constant flight and teleportation passed, she found herself looking forward to finally having a way to bypass the long journey more and more.

She sighed in relief as soon as she felt the connection to the Meadow had been established.

“*Hey, tree,*” she sent, disabling her Space Magic Resistance, appearing near the black grass, and waving in the general direction of eldritch energies. “*Notice anything different?*”

“*Oh? Was I supposed to? New outfit?*”

She narrowed her eyes at the crystal tree. “*Come on, tree.*”

A feeling of amusement reached her. *“You broke through. Though I suppose you’re still human.”*

“Of course I am. What else am I supposed to be?”

“Something more interesting?”

“Like a field of grass?”

“That would be a start.”

Ilea smiled. *“It’s good to be back here. Hey, there’s something I unlocked. Do you mind if I set down a space anchor here? You know, so that I can visit more often?”*

“Oh? Seems like you’ve gotten something useful after all, alongside what I assume to be a lot of things related to violence that are hardly worth mentioning. I would welcome a way for you to travel here. Set it down wherever you please.”

“Great. And for the record, I did get a lot of cool things related to violence.”

She focused on her skill and set down her third and last anchor in the fabric, right next to the field of black grass.

“Fuck yeah.”

Amusement flowed through the hall, the fireflies glittering with warm light.

“You gained weight,” the tree said, unnecessarily.

“Well observed, all-seeing god.”

“It’s good. You’ll be able to face larger enemies more efficiently.” The Meadow paused. *“You don’t seem to be in a rush for once. What has driven you to this secluded spot in this beautiful realm?”*

“Yeah, I’ll probably be around a little more in the coming weeks or even months. I need to max out my third Class’ skills.”

Ilea glanced over as the enchanters joined them, waving at her. Another glance to the side showed her a group of Awakened waiting a few hundred meters away.

“They occasionally bring gifts for the great tree, or ask for guidance,” Iana said, following her gaze. “Well done on the advancement. I know that the Meadow is very proud as well,” she added in a whisper.

“Oh, I know,” Ilea said. “Good to see you too.”

“You’ll be available for more testing?”

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Sure, yeah, I’ll be around. Here to essentially resume my studies.”

“So that’s how it is,” the Meadow sent.

“I suppose it is.”

“You’re here again, crawling back to the only true space magic teacher who could possibly elevate your measly spells.”

Ilea transferred herself closer to the tree, feeling the mana density increase tenfold. *“Only if the great tree has some time and wisdom to spare. I’m sure you’re very busy.”*

“You know, I actually am. But you’re hardly asking for anything substantial. About ten human sacrifices per day should suffice as payment.”

“Can I just use my own body? I can even do twenty if you just want the blood,” she suggested.

“It’s the souls I need.”

“Oh, I see. I’m sure there’s nothing nefarious going on with that.”

“Why would I deceive a mere mortal like you?”

“I’m immortal now. Age-wise, at least, so I’m getting close to morphing into a tree myself. Either that or a dragon.”

As she saw the space around her change, bits of rock forming in both familiar and new patterns, she smiled. Her training had just resumed.

“Oh, are you now? Well, I suppose even a creature like you can achieve minor feats like that,” it said.

“You can add in some resistance training while we’re at it. What do you think would be more beneficial, earth magic or wood magic? I don’t want to use both third-tier points.”

“That is entirely subjective. In Erendar, I would’ve suggested the former. Here… well, there are a lot of trees. In human lands, at least,” the Meadow said.

“You’re right. Earth is the safer bet.”

Ilea selected the resistance. The fact that she had trained with the Meadow allowed her to bring the skill to the third tier, though she assumed the Rubble Guardians would’ve had the same effect had she not met the magic tree.

‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1

Earth Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1
The earth trembles as arcane beings bend its nature to their will. You have found stone and earth to be a worthwhile opponent yet stood

unmoving in its destructive path. This skill will help you negate more of its damage.
2nd stage: Your skin and bones harden, adapting more and more to the element that threatened your life again and again.
3rd stage: You have faced true masters of earth magic, gaining a better understanding of its substance. You are able to traverse through earth and stone far more easily than before. This effect is reduced for magically created or controlled earth and stone.

"Huh? Like, what, a worm? Some burrowing creature? Well, I'll try it out later. Feel free to hurl a bunch of rocks at me between space attacks."

"As you wish," the Meadow said.

Ilea breathed in deep, smiling as she felt the magic all around her. *"It's good to be back."*

"And it's good to see you too. You've come a long way since you first entered my domain." A shower of pebbles crashed against her armor with little impact. *"And you've grown more dense."*

"Do I have to find a stronger tree to train with?"

"A very amusing proposition," the Meadow said, its voice entirely neutral.

Yeah. Nowhere near there. Not yet. Though I do wonder what it would take to win a bout. Ah, wait… it's a healer as well. Nope. I don't think I'll be able to do it. Bummer.

"What exactly are you thinking about? The look in your eyes has changed," the tree said.

Ilea smiled. *"Just violent things, nothing you should concern yourself with. But I have a question."*

"Ask away."

"Thanks. Now that I'm at five hundred, I can actually enhance my skills, like you said. I've waited so far because they're reset to the beginning of the third tier."

"And now that you're working on your skills anyway, you thought about enhancing a few?" the Meadow said.

"Yes. So, I can only enhance each skill once? What does it do exactly?"

"So far, I have only learned of the one enhancement, yes. Though again, you're human. I am not, nor are any of the Awakened I have shared information with on this topic. The effects can vary depending on the skill.

A stronger effect or an added effect to the third tier only. Nothing is fundamentally changed as far as I know, unlike with evolutions."

"So it's always better."

"It should be."

"I got another option called Derivative General Skill. What does that one do, exactly?"

"You did? Interesting. I have only met two creatures who have received one so far. I suppose it makes sense with humanity… You are versatile and adapt more quickly than others. Of course, only because you're so very bland and weak to begin with, but that is beside the point."

"It is indeed," Ilea answered with a smile.

"It will create General Skills based on techniques you frequently use and have mastered to a degree. In your case… hmm. The ashen things on your back, you use them a lot, but I have found them to be weaker than your flesh limbs. Are they a separate skill already?"

She shook her head.

"Then perhaps that would be an option. As to the actual benefits of the skill, it is hard to say, though they are not quite comparable to your Class skills."

"So just another enhancement?"

"A specialization more than an enhancement. But yes, essentially."

"Guess I'll have to try that out too… So, which skills should I enhance?" she mused, looking through her list. Setting a third-tier one back would reduce the skill's power by quite a bit, so she didn't want to choose too many.

But if I plan to stay in the area for a while to train, then now's the time. And after that, maybe I can try that key locator Iana and Christopher made for me and go look for more of those Taleen artifacts.

So, let's choose some skills.

Archon Strike is my main damage output at the moment. I think that would be too risky right now. Plus, I'd probably have to kill things to level it effectively. Or risk killing them, at least. I don't want the Class levels that may come with that quite yet.

Sentinel Reconstruction… might be an option. No evolution with Arcane Eternal, and with all the other regeneration and defensive boosts, this might be the time to actually risk it. The third tier will still be there anyway. And

I'll still have forty levels in the skill. Leveling it only requires me to fight strong enemies and get hurt, so that one's easy.

Azarinth Awakening, my aura that enhances pretty much everything, and is on constantly… The base effects would tank a bit, but that one will take a long time to level anyway. With my recent two hundred percent to body enhancement skills, I'll hardly feel a difference compared to before my evolutions. Also a good candidate.

Transfer, my main teleport… I'd rather not change. Though would the cooldowns… no, they're static. So it wouldn't really matter. Only the distance I can teleport would be affected. With Displacement around, I could easily enhance it now.

Dominion. Kind of want to keep the range how it is. It's such an important skill, I'll probably do that one later.

Sentinel Core I could level well, but do I want to reduce the numbers? At the same time, even a small bonus could be insane with how good the base skill already is.

Eternal Brawling is possible, but with the other options available, maybe not yet. Plus, I'd have to fight stuff to level it. Huntress… not yet either because I want to keep the high number of marks.

Sight seems fine the way it is. Not sure I even want to invest five Core points into that third tier. It's good to have, but I should be able to get away from pretty much anything as it is. Arcane Circulation is another possibility, but again, might take a backseat to other skills.

So that's one Class. Plenty of possibilities… At the same time, I don't want to burn all my Core points. If I do five per Class, it's fifty already. Let's look at the Titan Class first.

Mantle is my main defense next to Reconstruction. I don't feel comfortable lowering both skills at the same time, even if it would be way more efficient time-wise. With the recent evolution, I think I'll prioritize reconstruction.

Titan Core… well, I kind of want to properly try it out before I enhance it. Origin… not sure. It's been so vague, might just add more vagueness. But I have to enhance it at some point. Maybe once my third Class is at five hundred. Right now, it's still a really important asset in pretty much every battle.

I want to get a proper grasp of Embered Core first, same with Tempered Seal. Both offensive skills too, so they'll be difficult to level without killing

things. Authority… is an option. Definitely easier to level without killing anything than the previous ones, but harder than a defensive skill.

Wings are a good option. With Transfer, I have a good way to travel long distances now, and I think I was already pretty fast at the beginning of the third tier. I'd lose to Kyrian for sure, though… but if I don't invest now, he might win once he's at five hundred. Can't let that happen.

Vision is more offensive again. I'd rather go for Avatar of Ash. Most of the important bonuses are static there as well. That leaves Embered Form, which is entirely too offensive to level for now.

So many skills to consider, and they're all huge now.

And all that right after my evolutions. Almost feels like I'm eating a second cake after my first.

So we have Reconstruction, Awakening, Transfer, Sentinel Core, Circulation, Authority, Wings, and Avatar as good options. Should be able to level all of them without having to kill anything or even attack it in the first place… as long as I get hurt. Sounds acceptable. Eight skills, so forty Core points.

"Did your mind deactivate?" the Meadow asked.

Ilea looked up, ignoring the space and earth magic crashing into her. *"I looked through my skills… I'll try advancing a few. Give me a minute."*

She chose Avatar of Ash first.

'ding' Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Passive: Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
Increases your reflexes and speed by 50.5% [606%]. Your ability to avoid damage to your vitals when dodging increases.
2nd stage: Your muscles grow more dense. For each Resistance skill, your body becomes tougher. First-tier Resistances equal a static 5% increase, second-tier equals a static 10% increase, third-tier equals a static 15% increase [550%].
3rd stage: You can choose to allow magic damage to bypass your related resistance skills. The effect is canceled automatically upon reaching 50% of your health. Each Resistance skill in the second tier or higher increases the potential density of your created ash by a static 5% [205%]. Each Resistance skill in the third tier increases the speed of your ash projectiles by 5% [80%].

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic

Faster projectiles… for five Core Skill points and a need to level the third tier again. Hmm. That seems pretty steep, and yet it really is a straight upgrade. Let's keep going.

'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Active: Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
Send a healing pulse of mana into yourself or your ally with a touch. This skill can be channeled.
2nd stage: Your control is increased greatly, and you can now focus your healing on specific parts of the body. As long as mana and health remain, your Sentinel Reconstruction will restore your body. Lose your head and see for yourself! Health loss and critical blows are recalculated due to the nature of your healing.
3rd stage: You have healed your body time and time again, learning every cell and where it belongs. Sacrifice a large amount of mana to rush your healing to unprecedented speeds. Lack of knowledge about your body may result in heavy damage. This effect can be used on allies.
Category: Healing

Now that's more like it. The third tier can be used on allies.

Her healing had already been good, but now she assumed she was close to what a high-level cleric or priestess of an Order could do. Coupled with her Arcane Dominion bonus, an enemy would have to more or less kill an ally within a second or two.

The mana cost will be crazy too, though, depending on how many there are to heal. And I suppose I should get familiar with their anatomy beforehand.

'ding' Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Active: Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
Your body glows with the power of Azarinth, increasing your resilience, speed, Intelligence and Strength by 70.5% [705%].

2nd stage: Your sight, hearing, and sense of smell are also affected by Azarinth Awakening.
3rd stage: You are one with the Azarinth. The skill's upkeep has been removed. Instead, you may overcharge it with your life's energy. The amount depends on both skill level and health used. Excess health regeneration and healing beyond your full health can instead be used to overcharge Azarinth Awakening.
Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Ilea immediately felt the increase in power when she activated the effect, her regeneration alone providing a noticeable benefit. With her healing active too, she felt like she already matched the level thirty benefits from the previous version of the skill.

Might even be a bit stronger, she thought with a grin.

It would only last until she took damage and had to actually heal herself. Any health sacrifices could just be stacked on top, however, which made the skill even more useful.

'ding' Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Active: Transfer [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
Immediately appear at a distant place. Distance based on the level of the skill.
2nd stage: The time between transfers is reduced greatly. No ground contact needed between transfers. Upon arrival, you may use up to 500 mana to create an arcane explosion, damaging enemies and disrupting magical constructs and spells.
3rd stage: You may set five destinations you touch. You may change each destination once per week [32.43h]. You may travel to each destination once every day [4.63h]. Cast time is reduced by a static 50% for destinations you have already transferred to.
Category: Teleportation Magic

Two more, yes! And another cast time reduction. So down to less than twenty seconds. From, like, half an hour at first. Hah!

Damn, didn't expect to get two more locations so quickly, and here I was excited about three! Now, where could I possibly put them?

'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Passive: Sentinel Core [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
Your body was changed by magic. All pain is reduced greatly. Your body is 40.5% [526.5%] more durable. You heal even fatal injuries without the help of healing magic. Your natural health regeneration is improved by 120.5% [1566.5%].
2nd stage: The magic of Azarinth settles inside your body. Your resistance to magical damage is increased by a static 25% [325%], and your bones are three times as heavy and dense.
3rd stage: Your body has been battered and forged by magic. You absorb mana from enemy spells that hit you. Efficiency is determined by enemy mana used and your resistance to the type of magic. Mana cost for all skills reduced by a static 25%. Your body can absorb ambient mana. Amount dependent on availability and harmony.
Category: Healing – Body Enhancement

Ilea tried it out, gathering heat and channeling her healing to reduce her mana a little.

Alright… hmm. Pretty good, but I guess that's because of the Meadow's mana density. Still nowhere near close to my regeneration, but any additional mana absorption is nice.

"What did you do?" the Meadow asked.

Ilea blinked her eyes, looking at the tree. *"What? I enhanced a skill and can absorb ambient mana now."*

"Marvelous… You really are an interesting species. You're not dependent on it, I hope?"

"Says nothing about that. Just an additional way to get mana. I still regenerate it normally too."

"Good."

Still have a few skills to go, Ilea thought, continuing with her enhancements.

‘ding’ Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Passive: Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
You have learned of Archon Strike and Sentinel Reconstruction. Now you will learn of their Reversal.
Upon activation, Archon Strike will send a part of the struck enemy’s mana into you. No mana will be released on impact, reducing Archon Strike’s offensive potential to zero.
Upon activation, Sentinel Reconstruction will send a destructive force of channeled mana into you or an enemy you touch. The healing aspects are reduced to zero.
2nd stage: You may have both the original and reversed aspects activated at the same time. When an enemy partially or fully resists either Archon Strike or Sentinel Reconstruction, you absorb the dissipating mana.
3rd stage: Healing, power, resilience, speed. All requires balance. Your Destruction and Reconstruction spells have their potency increased by a static 25% of your lowest stat [112.5%]. You may channel health in addition to mana into the offensive uses of Archon Strike and Sentinel Reconstruction. Health cost to activate effects is reduced by a static 20%.
Category: Body Enhancement

A reduced health cost? Meaning I have to sacrifice only four thousand health into Archon Strike to get the full five thousand effect? Only for the health part… Another incentive to use that aspect, I suppose. But with the new bonus to Azarinth Awakening, I might want to keep health usage to a minimum. I guess I’ll only use it against enemies that can hurt me anyway.

‘ding’ Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Passive: Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
You are one with ash and ember, allies rushing to your aid.
2nd stage: Your understanding grows, allowing you to create greater change in ash and ember. Imbue mana into your creations. The ash and ember you imbue retain their form until the mana is used up.
3rd stage: The elements themselves become an extension of your body, an extension of your will, for as long as they stay in physical contact with

you. Ash not connected benefits from passive abilities enhancing your body. You may imbue commands into the ash and ember you have imbued with mana.
Category: Ashen magic

No change? Wait… the simple part is gone. So I guess I can give my ash slightly more complex commands.

'ding' Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Passive: Ashen Wings [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1
Your understanding of ash allows you to form wings from ash and ember. Strike your enemies from above and close the distance to deliver your wrath.
2nd stage: Your wings become more dense and tangible, able to help you defend and attack.
3rd stage: Ash Creation and Unity prove you are above the rest. Shape and form your wings to your liking, now directly affected by your control. You may charge your wings with mana and stamina to increase your flight velocity dramatically at the cost of heavily reduced control. Your resilience increases significantly during a charged flight.
Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

Kind of expected that one, she thought with a grin. *I guess my ash noticed how much I liked the way Kyrian cut through that Bluetail. And no more tail, huh? Guess I can still add that with my normal ash control if I want to.*

"Done," she sent.

"Some useful benefits, I hope?" Meadow asked. *"Do you believe you are ready to face your final nemesis?"*

"You're not my final nemesis, Meadow. Also, no. I'm not delusional. But I have plenty of things to try out, and a punching bag would help immensely to figure things out."

"So you want to fight me in addition to your skill training?" the creature asked, a gust of wind flowing out as the mana in the air increased to a near-visible level.

“Calm your leaves,” Ilea said as she sat down, focusing on the space magic puzzle still floating within her Arcane Dominion. *“There are a few creatures here that I want to visit.”*

“Well, suit yourself. I’ll be here.”

“Good.”

Forty-seven Core Skill points remaining. Don’t have enough for all my skills… but I might as well try.

‘ding’ One Derivative General Skill unlocked

Available Derivative General Skills:
[Spear of Ash]
[Ashen Limbs]
[Bulwark of Ash]
[Drill]

She quickly read through the descriptions; they were all pretty straightforward, as she had gathered from their titles.

Ah, shit. I want all of them. Twelve points… Fuck it, yeah.

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Spear of Ash

Spear of Ash – lvl 1
You have mastered the ability to form and throw spears made of ash.
Damage dealt with ashen spears is increased by 20%.

Worth it.

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Ashen Limbs

Ashen Limbs – lvl 1
You have mastered the ability to fight with limbs made entirely of ash.
Required harmony is reduced by 25%.

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Bulwark of Ash

Bulwark of Ash – lvl 1
Many times have you used walls of ash to defend yourself and your allies. Resilience of ashen walls is increased by 20%.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Drill

Drill – lvl 1
You have used your body and ash to form what is essentially a human-powered drill. While quite silly, the devastating attacks showed results. Drills spin 50% faster.

Definitely worth it. I wonder what else I could unlock if I try things out? The copies I tried out are sure to become an option at some point. Or the focused eye beam!

"You're distracted," the Meadow said.

"I know," Ilea said. *"You mentioned before that once I enhance all my Class skills, I should get a fourth-tier option?"*

"You're far from enhancing all your skills, Ilea, let alone getting them to their maximum level again. Once you get there, the option may present itself. It did for me."

"What's your fourth-tier spell?"

"Curious, as always. I will show you, once you manage to win."

"Win what?"

"Do you have to ask?" the Meadow asked.

A bout?

She pouted a little. *"That's not possible."*

"Then you'd better find a way to do the impossible."

"Wait… You have one for every school of magic, one for every Class… or am I wrong?"

The tree remained silent, but an air of smugness flowed through the area.

Ilea wondered how she knew the air was smug. Space Awareness, she supposed. It just wasn't quite there yet to determine the exact reason.

"I'll find out eventually," she said with a grin.

"Of course you will," it said, lightly patting her head with an invisible force.

Instead of reacting to the touch, Ilea tried to spot the spell formation it had used. The Meadow was right; she should focus on her training.

A few hours passed without meaningful progress until Ilea's concentration lapsed, and she fell on her back. "This sucks…"

"Dancing lessons at some point?" she sent to Claire.

A few seconds passed. *"In three days. Sunrise. My office."*

Ilea grinned, already looking forward to something a little more grounded than literal space magic.

"You're not quite as driven as I remember," the Meadow said. *"What's wrong?"*

Rolling in the black grass, Ilea looked at her hand, then up at the tree. *"Last time, it felt more urgent. You don't mind me being on the grass, by the way?"*

"Perhaps I could give you an ultimatum. Reach the end of the third tier, or I destroy this world."

Ilea just rolled her eyes. *"You're not a good liar."*

"How would you know anything I've said so far has been the truth?"

"A hunch," she mused.

"Humans and their hunches. You place way too much trust in your instincts and feelings, disregarding crucial evidence. But I suppose I should be thankful. I wouldn't be here otherwise," the Meadow said. *"And no, I do not mind. Here, I do not need to restrain my form to a dedicated area within a temple or hide myself from mana-starved beasts."*

"We definitely do, you're right. But I suppose it's what makes us human. Or part of it," Ilea said. *"Do you know Goliath, by the way? An Awakened smith living in Hallowfort. He came back after the elves attacked me."*

"A curious creature that one, yes. One of the few who have been able to communicate with me directly."

"You talk often?" Ilea asked, sitting up now. She was most certainly procrastinating.

"No. Goliath is not a talkative being, nor one that wishes to be disturbed. Traits I can appreciate deeply. A stark contrast to you. Because you ask a lot of questions, and you constantly come to me for help and training." Its tone was dry.

"I get it," Ilea answered and stood up, cracking her neck.

"Unable to figure out your own skills, trying to find an easy route to power, using me for teleportation and knowledge," the Meadow continued.

“I said I got it.”

“‘Share your godly secrets, Endless Meadow.’ But you don’t even bring gifts or sacrifices.”

Ilea leaned forward a little and smirked. *“And that’s exactly why you like me, you old piece of landscape. Can you beam me up to his smithy?”*

Got something I want him to check out.

“After that insult?” the Meadow asked.

“Yeah.”

The sound of laughter on the wind echoed through the vicinity before she vanished, her resistance disabled to allow for a direct teleportation.

“Hello there,” Ilea said, appearing before the smith, his golden eyes focused on a delicate construct of interlinked steel wires.

“Welcome, being of the arcane,” Goliath said as he looked up, the shape of his eyes suggesting joy. “Hast thou come for a request, or to seek counsel?” he asked, his whisper-like voice reverberating through the smithy.

Ilea leaned against the burning hot forge and summoned the Wyrm eye. “Ever seen anything like this?”

“That is an interesting object,” the Meadow said.

“Don’t spy on me,” Ilea answered.

“Just because your vision is limited to a ridiculous degree doesn’t mean I’m spying when I don’t reduce mine to a similarly stunted field of view.”

Goliath came closer, taking the eye after giving Ilea a questioning look. “You… fought this creature?”

Ilea nodded.

“Quite a battle it must have been,” Goliath mused. “I have not the tools nor the skill to use this as a raw material. If you wish to embed it within armor, I could do so.”

“I’m not sure yet. I can use it with my ash anyway, and I think it might be safer if I just store it inside my necklace when I don’t need it. I’m more interested in the quality. Any idea what it does?”

“Draconic. Indeed, born of flame… It should be resistant to most damage. More so against everything that is fire and heat. And I believe… yes, it shares the regenerative characteristic of timeless objects.”

Ilea crossed her arms. “Really? The Wyrm didn’t seem to regenerate… at all.”

“Those of draconic origin… are old. Truly ancient. It would have recovered, given enough time. How long such a process would require? I do not know,” Goliath said. “The same is true for what you have here.”

“I hope it doesn’t take a human lifetime,” Meadow said. *“Better not damage that thing if you want to use it.”*

“I figured,” Ilea answered, then summoned the Scorching Wyrm scales instead. “Think you can make me a set of armor from this?”

The smith looked over the material. “This is… most impressive. The durability. I won’t be able to forge this. Not here.”

“What do you need?”

“I would require… a forge more durable than these scales. This is not made of metal, nor stone… This material is unique to the Wyrm to which it belonged. I would have to summon heat enough to shape it.”

“What could be durable enough to hold that amount of heat?”

“The Endless Meadow,” Goliath answered.

Ilea sighed. “Why is that tree always the solution?”

“Because of my incomprehensible greatness,” the Meadow said. *“I shall help. I’m interested in that material as well. Creating that amount of heat, however…”*

“That will be my task, with thy help,” Goliath said, pointing at Ilea.

“Sure,” Ilea said. “And we have the Trakorov backup plan.”

“It may not be inclined to help,” the Meadow said.

“Why do you think so? It helped with the Elemental.”

“I doubt that creature would heed any call. It mostly just sleeps and hardly answers my attempts at communication.”

“Well, that’s just your lack of charisma. I’ll figure it out if it comes to that. Maybe my heat will be enough… focused through the eye if needed. You have time later?”

Goliath bowed lightly. “I shall join you this moment.”

She waved her arms. “No, no. Finish what you were working on. I’m not in a rush. I just remembered something else anyway.”

“I will call for п он и [illegible] once I have finished my work,” Goliath said.

Ilea blinked a few times, trying to figure out what she had just heard. “Did you…”

The Meadow grinned within her mind. *“Curious. I told you.”*

Curious indeed, she thought before Meadow teleported her back.

“Iana, Chris, you two should probably have a look at this as well,” she said, summoning the runed stones she had gathered on the Krahen Isles, right after their fight against the Terror. “I found the same runes below Ravenhall. The distance is equal to what the Taleen could do, but I doubt it was them who set this up, mostly because it seemed like they were the ones who tried to storm the keep.”

The enchanters paused their work, crouching down to check the runes. A few started floating.

“Unknown to me. Blood magic, I’d wager,” the Meadow said.

“I’ll let you guys check it out. Let me know if you find out more. And try not to accidentally bring about the end of the world.”

“We’ll try not to summon anything,” Iana said, scribbling some things down in her notebook. She blinked a few times, looking away from the runes. “Powerful, these.”

Ilea felt the Meadow healing the woman.

“I will have a few of my eyes on them,” it said. *“Already bored?”*

“I just don’t feel like sitting here solving puzzles all day. I’ll be back later.”

“Very well.”

“Could you teleport me to the tenth layer, oh Endless Meadow?”

“At your service, Lilith,” it said, moving her to the cliffs.

* * *

Ilea spread her wings immediately, stopping her fall before she looked around. She felt the winds, stronger than most everything usually present on the surface in the north.

Five hundred and skills enhanced. I guess I underestimated how much work it would take to level up my space skills. She sighed. *Well, as long as I have enough distractions between lessons, I should be fine. Now, let’s see how much stronger I am.*

She slowly descended, landing on a rocky plateau with various crevices leading farther down. She charged Monster Hunter, pausing for a moment before she looked up.

Hmm. Something’s missing.

She sent out a message. *“Violence. Training in Descent. Lightning Elemental. Join?”*

"Violence!" came the reply.

Ilea smiled, releasing Monster Hunter in a whistle that reverberated against the walls, reaching far through the cavern despite the strong winds.

A screech resounded from below, blue sparks flowing through the air as a large blue bird shot out from one of the many crevices, twirling in the air before its glowing eyes came to rest on the intruder.

"I'm back. Remember me?" she said with a grin, waving at the creature.

[Young Lightning Elemental – lvl ???] – [Bored/Hungry]

"What do you even eat?" she asked. The bird was close to being a fourmark, but she had no idea how long it would take the creature to get there, if it was possible at all.

The elemental didn't reply, instead charging a massive lightning spell.

So that's how it is…

Ilea added layers to her armor, increasing its durability to the highest possible degree. Her Azarinth aura started glowing, enhanced by her healing and regeneration. The ash she could control was reduced somewhat by her heavier armor, but she found the impact to be much less than creating copies.

Heat began to form within her, both Titan and Embered Core working in tandem to quickly increase the broiling energy within. She breathed out, smiling at the incredible charge, reaching in seconds what had taken her half a minute before her evolutions.

Then there was a flash of blue light, a bolt of lightning zapping through the air and entering her dominion.

Yeah. I used to have the Spirits to fight in between lessons. Guess I'll have to find alternatives here.

Ilea burst into white flame, her smile widening when the attack crashed into her outstretched hand, much of it absorbed by both heat and mana. Some of it was destroyed by her flames, and the rest burned into her ash, unable to get through her thick armor.

"I hope that's not all that you have."

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TWO

Old Acquaintances

Ilea and the young Elemental both remained motionless for a moment, lightning pulsing around the creature while fire clung to her.

Then ashen spears formed, touching her back, quickly charged with heat as the Elemental started circling her, firing out bolts of lightning that crashed into her with little impression.

She threw her spears, surprised at her increased speed. A few crashed into the wall behind the bird as it dodged, exploding in showers of heat and flame. Ilea managed to veer the rest to the right, her eyes on the Elemental as she slowly turned, keeping the spears locked onto their target.

Orbs of lightning formed around the Elemental, shooting out and crashing into the spears. Static, flames, and heat exploded outward when the orbs impacted her projectiles.

Should've expected it to have some kind of anti-guided missile technology.

Ilea summoned her Wyrm eye, spreading ash around her right arm to form a cannon-like extension with the draconic artifact set within.

"Dodge this."

A beam of flame shot out, far faster than her spears. This time, she grazed the Elemental's wing.

My aim sucks.

She slowly increased her weight, heat charging as she watched the elemental slip slightly, turning her way with glowing eyes.

Yeah, just stay there, she thought, forming a small crosshair made of ash at the front of her cannon. She leaned her head against her arm, then released the heat within her.

The beam flashed out, crashing against a bright blue shield, sparks flying off in all directions, before the Elemental's defense shattered, causing it to screech as its body was enveloped by flame.

Ilea looked at the dull blue wound on its chest when the magical debris had cleared, watching sparks flow in to cover the section once again.

"You like that?" she asked, sending another wave of heat at it, this time using her left hand.

The chaotic beam spread out to envelop a large part of the plateau they stood on. She grinned when the Elemental teleported away, its form condensing to a small spark before expanding again beyond the range of her beam.

"Seems like our roles have reversed, doesn't it?" Ilea said, sending heat-charged, burning ashen spears at the creature, smiling as she watched it dodge through the continuous bombardment.

"You do like to gloat," the Meadow said.

"It did burn me to a crisp the last time we met. I feel like it's only fair," she answered, sending another focused beam at the creature, burning one of its wings.

The Elemental tumbled through the air, flying down into one of the deep canyons that scarred the rocky landscape.

Ilea grinned, starting to run even as her weight continued to increase, heat gathering within her as she absorbed ambient mana, her auras pushing her strength, speed, and abilities further. The ground shook as she ran, each step sending tremors through the rock, a few cracks forming where the plateau couldn't support her weight.

Three smaller birds made of lightning shot out from below, rushing toward her with increasing speed. Ilea didn't use Displacement, nor did she try to burn the creatures; instead, she simply charged through them as they impacted her form. Lightning coursed through her, each bird ripping a chunk of armor away. The ash reformed near instantly before she jumped into the canyon below, her wings unable to keep her afloat.

She charged them, waiting until she found the Elemental hiding in a nearby crevice. She aimed her cannon when the monster released its

prepared attack, a huge cascade of lightning, their magic crashing together to create a shockwave of heat and sparks.

Ilea came shooting through the magical debris, her wings pushing her heavy form forward, a drill of ash spinning ahead of her, seemingly part of her body. She activated Space Shift when she got close, preventing the Elemental from teleporting.

It barely managed to dodge, one of its wings caught as ash and white flame dug into its defensive layer of magic. The creature only managed to resist for a split second, Ilea's weight and momentum pushing her through. Sparks turned to splatters of blood as she drilled through the wing, ripping through the monster's flesh and tissue before she dug into the stone of the canyon wall beyond.

As she finally came to a stop about twenty meters later, she heard the descending screeching.

Ah, this is fun. Fighting an Elemental and being on the offensive, she thought as she reformed the drill into two of her copies. *Tank its clones,* she commanded.

She turned around, walking through the small tunnel as her copies rushed forward, stopping the smaller birds that came flying toward them. Each clone managed to survive one bird, the ash dissipating when the second hit.

Ilea came out of the tunnel, looking down into the dark depths of the canyon where she saw a glint of blue light, a beautiful beam of energy coming right at her. She jumped, taking the attack head-on, healing her quickly dissipating mantle as it bore the brunt of the attack.

Finally, she slammed down on the stone floor of the canyon nearly a hundred meters farther down. Her legs had cratered into the ground, but a quick use of Displacement brought her out.

"How are we doing?" she asked, looking at the Elemental floating ahead of her, its blue eyes leaving a glowing trail as it slowly bobbed up and down, its wing apparently back to normal.

Not quite enough as a training partner anymore, she thought with a grin.

"I apologize for the interruption, but there is a creature here who claims to be your friend," the Meadow sent.

"Hold on," Ilea said and turned away slightly from the Elemental. "Call," she said in an apologetic tone, touching her temple. *"Yes, a friend?*

What's their name?"

"It calls itself Violence. A Fae."

"Ah, yes, I called for it to come."

The Meadow didn't say anything for a few seconds.

"Are you still there?" Ilea sent. Then she looked at the Elemental, who had now landed. "Sorry, just a second."

[Young Lightning Elemental – lvl ???] – [Excited]

No longer hungry? That figures. You eat mana. Just like me.

"I am… Why would you want to bring such a creature here?" the Meadow asked.

"Because it's my friend? I found it the first time I explored the Descent. Can you beam it down here?"

"But… Ilea, you tasked me with the protection of Hallowfort. I don't think it's a good idea to bring a being such as that into this territory, even if it is merely a small part of a whole."

"Are you scared of the little fellow?" she teased. *"Really? Old ancient Meadow?"*

"Don't be ridiculous. But it could wipe this entire settlement away on a whim."

Ilea rolled her eyes. *"So could you! Good thing then that you're both friends, so don't be rude to our visitor and beam it down. Please."*

"I will want to have a talk with this one… at a later time."

Vi-o-lence! the Fae sent when it appeared next to her, twirling as it extended its small arms in joy.

"Hey, little man," Ilea replied, extending her ash in greeting. "How've you been?"

The Fae twirled around within the ash, giggling before it came to a stop. It held its head for a moment before shaking it, getting rid of the confusion.

Stronger! it said, pointing at her.

"Indeed. New evolution. I'm just testing it a little against our friend here."

The Fae giggled again, near manically this time around.

Domination.

Not.

Testing.

“Well…” Ilea said, scratching her armored cheek a little.

Violence! the Fae said.

“I suppose you’re right. Care to watch?” Ilea asked with a smile.

Show.

Magic!

“Sure,” she said, reducing her weight again as she turned back to the Elemental. “Just keep your distance. It hasn’t gotten any less dangerous.”

With that, she ran forward, her Arcane Dominion pushing destructive mana into the bird as soon as she got into range. This time, she displaced a few beams, letting the last three hit as she formed a few ashen copies.

Hunt that bird. Don’t kill it. Stay careful, she instructed, watching the three ashen beings run off, circling the Elemental, who split into several copies as well.

Ilea vanished, reappearing next to the Elemental, her fist moving out to hit the creature as a sphere of concentrated lightning flashed out, scorching the ground. She pushed through, the first two layers of her ash healing as her fist connected with the being. It floated away from the impact, showing no wound or negative reaction.

She was sure her intrusion had easily gone through its defensive layer, but if anything, the bird seemed more energized. *You’re kidding me, right?* she thought, shaking her head as she laughed.

“Guess I’m not the best one at absorbing damage, hmm?”

She locked eyes with the creature, which seemed to have a smug expression on its lightning-beaked face. The bird shook slightly as its side erupted, flames surging out from where the inserted mana charges had exploded in fire. It screeched, stabilizing itself as a sphere of lightning spread out, disintegrating two ashen clones who hadn’t been able to distance themselves in time.

I wonder if I can overwhelm its absorption with charged strikes. But I don’t want to kill it.

As she rushed it again, she smiled when the bird barely moved to avoid her, Ilea’s fist crashing into its chest with pure physical force. Her wings pushed her forward as ashen limbs moved around the Elemental, keeping it close while she punched its chest, shockwaves ripping through the monster’s flying body until a sphere of lightning burned Ilea’s limbs away.

She released Space Shift, stopping her attacks as she watched the Elemental crash against the stone ground below. Its chest looked dented,

blood evaporating when it touched the lightning.

Ilea felt her healing take care of the soreness in her arms. The slight internal bleeding and ruptures had already been taken care of during the magically enhanced pummeling. She looked at her hand and formed a fist, back to full power again, except for the mana she had used.

The Fae giggled, floating behind Ilea while the Elemental glared at it, now standing again, its caved-in chest reformed.

That creature is nearly a four-mark. And I just fucking destroyed it, she thought, watching the young Elemental bow its head.

"Don't bow to me. I don't like it," she said, but the creature didn't move.

She felt a pulse of mana from the Fae, which was now sitting on her shoulder. The Elemental looked up and spread its wings, screeching before it flew closer.

"Can I feed you with my reverse healing?" she asked the Elemental before glancing at the Fae.

It just shrugged.

Try.

She did.

The bird screeched at first but seemed to calm down again a moment later, its form pulsing just a little more, the change visible within her dominion. It seemed to understand what was happening.

"It can absorb destructive healing magic?"

Arcane.

"Yeah, I suppose. Though I guess I could overwhelm it anyway. Just need enough. Same as that Wyrm did to me with fire."

"Hey, Meadow, can we get a lift to the fifteenth layer?" she asked.

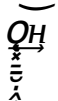
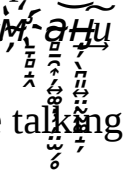
"Already done with the Elemental?" it asked.

"I'll visit again for sure, but right now I want to see how far I can go. You might have to show me those fourth-tier skills sooner rather than later."

"I'll be looking forward to it," the Meadow said, teleporting both of them down to the staircase leading to the fifteenth layer, where the Storm Griffin resided.

Ilea sat down near the entrance, looking out onto the tundra, either created by the Ascended or somehow forming naturally down here.

Might it be that the creatures summoned, put here, or born of mana influenced the area after some time had passed?

n  *u*  

Strong.

“You think so?” Ilea asked. “You’re talking about Meadow, right?”

Meadow.

Maybe.

“Tree thingy with a thousand eyes. Eldritch abomination, space mage, and local protector of life.”

Yes!

Violence!

“I’m not sure it’s too fond of that, actually.”

The little Fae looked to droop a little. She patted it on its head and formed an ashen copy of the little creature.

Play with it, she intoned.

The Fae looked at each other, one entirely black and the other almost. Her ash, however, didn’t go near the near-absolute darkness inherent to the magical creature.

Ilea watched the two take a few steps to one side, the Fae lifting a hand and her ash copying the movement. Violence giggled when her ash copied the gesture but made no sound.

Friend!

“Sure,” Ilea said. “It’s part of me, so I suppose it should be your friend as well.”

The little Fae hugged its new ashen friend, taking its hand before it walked next to Ilea.

Violence? it asked, looking up at her.

Ilea smiled, seeing her ash almost in sync with the Fae. “It’s right there,” she said, pointing up at the layer’s distant ceiling. “Can’t see its eyes, but the way its body is positioned, it might’ve already seen us and is just waiting to strike.”

Protect Violence, she quickly told the ash before forming another clone, this time of her. She imbued it with the same command. Just in case. She knew the little Fae had adequate protections of its own, even against a four-mark attack, but it wasn’t invincible either.

“Think you’re stronger than Meadow?” she asked.

The true Fae had a higher level, that much she knew, though when it came to actual fighting prowess, she had no idea how things stacked up. Both beings were sapient, just like her. And Ilea could fight non-Awakened beings of twice her level.

Stronger?

Violence put a hand to its chin, thinking carefully.

Older.

Maybe.

Fight.

Unnecessary.

“Because you don’t have an issue with it?”

The little Fae nodded.

Peaceful.

“You’re not peaceful, though,” she said with a smile.

Violence.

Yes.

Fae.

Less.

“Less violent. Yeah, I mean, it didn’t kill or eat me when I visited. Now that I think about it, I’m training with the Meadow at the moment. Would you be up for helping with that? I’m working on my Space Awareness. I’m sure you have plenty of ideas on how to get me to understand the intricacies.”

Violence looked at her and put a hand where its heart would be, if it were human.

Honored!

She laughed. “Thank you,” she said, copying the gesture. “Sure you don’t need to be doing something else? I didn’t take you away from an important task, did I?”

Exploration.

Dangerous!

Exciting.

“That sounds more interesting than watching me fail at comprehending space magic,” Ilea admitted.

Maybe.

Friend.

Help.

“I appreciate it. Know that you can call for help anytime as well, if you’re ever in need,” she said. “Just use the mark.”

Appreciation!

Violence?

Ilea stood up, cracking her neck as she checked her armor. Her ash capacity was at about two-thirds with her improved armor and the copies protecting Violence.

“Getting impatient already?” she asked the Fae, stepping out into the open.

“Says the woman who left her lessons to go fight monsters,” the Meadow sent.

“Shush,” she answered.

Her wings spread, her tail forming as she ascended. The weight from her armor layers alone was hardly an issue, barely slowing her down, but it was nothing compared to the five hundred percent increase from her Titan Core third tier or even the straight density increases her evolutions had provided.

Titan Core doesn’t actually increase the limit of my heat storage, just its generation, she thought, looking at the still unmoving Griffin in the distance. *I wonder if I can reach that thing from here.*

“Just need to charge a spell,” she told the Fae, using her core abilities to form heat, embers appearing around her, which she absorbed heat from with her third-tier Lava Resistance. The latter was a minimal bonus, but everything would help.

I’m fucking mega resistant to heat now, holy shit, she thought, feeling the power within her. She looked down to find a few dried-up blades of grass catching fire. *How long until the ground literally melts in my presence?*

It took about half a minute to get her heat generation to overwhelm her healing, by which time sweat was dripping down her brow and flames clung to the ground around her. Finally, she formed her cannon with an added crosshair. Looking through it, she frowned.

That’s way too fucking far away. Four, maybe five hundred meters. I need an actual scope or something. And something perfectly aligned to the eye within. My hand is just resting on it right now. No clue if the beam comes out straight.

“Oh well,” she whispered, pushing a few thousand health into her aura and releasing the heat.

The chaotic torrent flowed into the eye in less than a second, focused by the body part she had taken from the Wyrm and released in a beam of heat and energy on the other side.

She found the distance to be far enough for her to see the beam advance. It traveled fast. Faster than her charged flying speed at least, but not quite something unavoidable.

Downside of not being a light mage, she thought, adjusting her arm slightly in the near second it took for all the heat to be pushed through the focus. *Like that fucking Monarch.*

Ilea saw the Griffin fall as she stored the eye again, a trail of fire visible where her spell had cut into the ceiling. Fires clung to the creature as well, its path more a plummet than a controlled flight.

Now that’s some range.

Without the eye, the new power of Embered Core had an effective range of forty to maybe sixty meters. The heat would burn up everything beyond for maybe another thirty to forty meters, but against the kind of shit she hunted at this point, that hardly mattered.

Let’s see how you’re doing.

Ilea took off, her wings flapping as she roared, copying a Cliff Wyvern, whose level seemed close enough now for Monster Hunter to imitate their call somewhat convincingly. To her ears, at least.

Even though I could disintegrate one of them by now.

The Griffin sent its own call in return, obviously more than a little pissed.

“Aw, don’t be like that, I was just the one to attack first this time,” she said, pushing onward with a smile.

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THREE

Eye of the Storm

Ilea slowed down when she saw the first wind blades enter her Arcane Dominion. For now, she refrained from teleporting away.

Last time, they cut me apart, she thought, raising her arms to soften the blow from the first spell.

The blades whisked past her, a mist of ash stirred up where the spell had cut into her defensive layers. Not quite enough to reach her skin.

Ilea used her dominion to pull the ash back, her armor still healing when the next attack hit her, followed by a dozen more.

Really pissed you off there…

Ilea landed on the ground with her wings cut apart, blood dripping as her flesh and mantle recovered after the volley of attacks. The injuries were minor at best; most of the spells had only cut through various layers of ash.

She ran the rest of the way, closing the distance with the low-flying Griffin, a grin on her face as she locked eyes with it. Her newly reformed wings moved and charged as her ashen spears shot out, deflected by a whirlwind manifesting around the monster.

Ilea pushed through, coming close to the creature before a surge of air pushed her to the side, redirecting her flying form away from the Griffin, a few of her limbs scratching its strong hide. As she pushed destructive mana into it through her dominion, Ilea dodged it in the air, moving her tail and wings to avoid the wind blades coming at her.

A few of them grazed her; more of them were deflected away as she circled the flying creature, its eyes on her at all times, not showing a reaction to the constant reverse healing being channeled into it. Ilea didn’t hold back, the spells that hit her easily restoring whatever mana she was using. She sent out a blast of heat, hitting a wall of air that formed out of nowhere.

The wall pushed against the heat, ultimately reaching Ilea. She could feel the pressure as she was sent flying back, her wings unable to withstand the spell until she hit the ground, her limbs digging into the stone to keep her from tumbling away. She watched the Griffin advance, pushing the wall forward until she vanished, teleporting twice to reach it. Her fist lashed out, stopped entirely by visible air moving slowly around the monster.

Ilea released the heat within her in a circle, pushing against the defensive layer before she vanished again, this time grappling onto the creature’s back. She could only remain there for a moment, air pressure pushing her away a moment later. Using her third-tier resistance, she went with the flow, coming back around where the spell’s influence didn’t reach.

Her limbs scraped against a layer of wind before her fist finally landed, sending thousands of points’ worth of mana and health into the Griffin in a single strike. This time, it screeched, flying up to try and get away from her.

She saw a few hundred wind blades form and flew straight at them as she activated Phaseshift. The blades passed through her as she stacked health into her auras, white flame erupting a moment later when she returned to normal space.

She reached her hand out before blinking, a wave of ash igniting and spreading over the monster’s defenses. She teleported to the other side of the Griffin, using Archon Strike and Tempered Seal to send waves of mana into it. Another wave of heat and energy crashed into the sphere of wind she had felt coming with her precognition.

The Griffin was on the defensive now, flying up and away as it sent spell after spell against her.

Ilea displaced, tanked, or shifted through its attacks, her teleportation repeatedly bringing her close. Each moment she had in close quarters allowed her to send devastating waves of destructive mana into the monster, and the seals gathered more heat with each strike, still waiting within the being to be activated.

She stopped in the air, ignoring the wind blades impacting her armor, some cutting through where only one or two layers remained, digging into her flesh and drawing blood. A nuisance at best – but, more importantly, it returned mana to her. Each strike cost her several thousand mana, forcing her to stay at a distance for a little while to recover. The Griffin had stopped moving quite as quickly, favoring its right wing. A few bloodstains had appeared on its side.

Yeah. This is very different from last time.

Ilea teleported back when she felt a large amount of mana gather close to her sparring partner, then she grinned at the sight of the gathering storm around her. *Already pushed you this far?* she thought, moving her wings lazily as she regenerated her mana. Azarinth Awakening flared back up when her health reached its maximum, creating more heat within her every second.

She looked up to see clouds form out of thin air, and as a maelstrom of air whirled around, the tip of a tornado broke out of the clouds, moving down until it enveloped the Griffin. The pressure increased as the storm spread out, chunks of stone ripping out of the ground and rising into the fast-moving wind. Her wings strained against the power, her spell and resistances unable to keep her steady.

Ilea started spinning around the Griffin, the storm enveloping her as her vision was reduced to her dominion, her body tumbling as debris struck her armor. She could see tiny blades of wind moving chaotically through the air, her precognition unable to determine their flight paths. Dodging was impossible; she couldn’t maneuver through the pressure. Teleportation was the only thing that allowed her to evade an incoming attack if necessary.

She felt her armor being slowly sanded away by the thousands of small blades, much like the four-mark Bluetails had managed in the ocean. Here, however, she persisted, her defenses holding up thanks to the additional layers of ash and her healing. She laughed, though the sound was drowned out by the raging storm as she tumbled, crashing against chunks of stone the size of cars, leaving pebbles and dust mixing with her ash and blood in the wind.

Yes. This is it.

The impacts hardly bothered her. It took more than this to break her bones. Ilea focused as she healed through the abuse, the spinning making her a little dizzy. Flare of Creation and Titan of Ash, however, prevented her

from getting stunned. Another use of Transfer brought her out of the storm, and the perfect calm in the air confused her for a moment as her wings and eyes adjusted.

Not out of the storm, she thought, seeing the towering whirlwind move around her. She could hardly believe how still the air in the pillar at its center was. It was as if she had come to a sealed-off room without any windows. And yet she could feel the presence of the storm, not just magically but instinctually. Ilea felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, the sheer power around her pushing her to seek shelter.

As she smiled at the idea of sheltering inside the ongoing whirlwind against the perfect stillness around her, she saw the Griffin moving down to her height within the pillar. Its wings had stopped pushing against the air to keep it afloat; they moved more slowly now, almost ethereally. Her dominion was alight with magic; everything around her was part of the spell woven by the creature.

Transfer didn't work. *Just as I thought,* she mused, unraveling the ever-changing fabrics around her. Displacement would take her somewhere, though she was sure the magic nearby would influence her destination. Ilea let it be for now, not about to back down against this spell until she had no other option but to do so.

She felt the pressure rise to ridiculous degrees, compressing her body as she tried to push against it. The air within her lungs left with a gasp, Ilea's eyes popping a moment later as her body shook, her blood vessels rupturing as her ash was pressed into her skin. Her dominion remained active, reverse healing still entering the Griffin, its body trembling as it seemed to breathe a little harder.

Ilea's own healing kept her alive and focused, the enhanced blades and spears of air now cutting into her and dealing massive damage to her ash and skin, some even destroying organs. None managed to get through her bones, though; Displacement prevented any of them from reaching her brain.

Too stupid to focus on my mind, it seems. Her face was locked in a grin as her muscles struggled to move against the pressure. *If you can't kill me,* she thought, her ash and body cut up and healed again a hundred times over, *you will lose.*

Barely half a minute passed before she felt the pressure lessen, her arm straining as it moved upward, aiming at the Griffin. Her eyes healed, this

time resisting the pressure. She finally managed to get her arm high enough, and her hand shook before her auras glowed brighter for a moment. Then all the heat gathered within her was sent out in a roaring beam of energy and flames. The heat charges within the Griffin ruptured its insides in the same moment.

She grinned at the sight of her attack brushing the disrupted defensive air around the Griffin away, setting its form alight as it screeched and retreated. As Ilea flew after the descending creature, the storm around them broke apart, stone and debris flung all around, impacting the ground and walls with clouds of dust and showers of rocks.

The Griffin stumbled as it landed, half its body scorched. Ilea landed a few meters away, a wave of air pushed aside by her abrupt impact, before a single teleport brought her close enough for her fist to slam into the monster's beak. The physical force of a charged Archon Strike ruptured her arm but cracked the Griffin's beak at the same time. She charged again, watching as the monster stumbled backward, its talons alone keeping it from falling.

I can face a four-mark now.

She stepped closer, pushing through the wind magic it summoned.

On equal terms.

An upper cut slammed into the monster's jaw. Ilea felt the flesh and muscle in her arm explode, stripped away by the sheer force of the attack as she dislocated her shoulder. The Griffin's head whipped up, and there was a crack like thunder as something in its spine broke. It slumped to the ground immediately after, not moving, yet she knew it was still alive.

Ilea breathed out, grabbing her shoulder before she pushed down hard. A crack met her ears as she balled her right fist, her ash receding for a moment to let the stripped and dead flesh of her arm fall to the ground, fresh muscle and skin already forming below.

"You're a tough motherfucker," she said, crouching down to check the beast. It was recovering, despite all its wounds and the broken neck.

A good training partner.

Ilea looked at a nearby slab of rubble, jumping up the three-meter-high rock before she sat down and summoned herself a meal. She kept an eye on the Griffin's health, trying to figure out its anatomy with her dominion. Helping it heal didn't seem necessary. It was recovering quickly, so she let it be.

VI
O
LENCE!

The Fae appeared on top of the downed monster's head, tapping it a few times with its stubby arm. It shied away when the body twitched, teleporting behind Ilea's head.

She laughed as her ashen copy and the dark Fae rushed toward them, unable to keep up with the excited creature.

I'd feel bad for the Griffin if it hadn't almost killed us last time around.

"Did you enjoy the show?" she asked, continuing her meal as the Fae looked at her food with curious white eyes. Ilea offered it some, but the creature just looked at her.

Show.
Good.
Strong!

"The storm spell was pretty impressive," she said, checking her messages quickly.

'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2
'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 22
'ding' Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 21
'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 27

'ding' Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 2
'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 11
'ding' Oxygen Repository reaches 2nd lvl 7
'ding' Spear of Ash reaches lvl 2
'ding' Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 22
'ding' Wind Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 8
'ding' Wind Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9

'ding' You have survived the Blade Tempest spell – 1 Core Skill point awarded

It’s good to see my main spells level again, she thought, trying to feed the Fae some rice.

No.

Food.

“It’s good though,” Ilea said and continued eating. Her ashen constructs had reached them again, and the little ash Fae was now hitting the real one on its head with its arm.

Confused.

“I assume it’s because you didn’t wait for them. It’s dangerous to just come over here; there’s still some debris falling,” Ilea pointed out, though what was falling now mostly came from the ceiling, where heavy impacts had left quite a bit of damage.

Safe.

Ilea pointed to a large rock several meters across crashing into the ground nearby, a wave of dust and wind spreading out from the impact.

“Safe?” she asked, raising her brows.

Safe.

The Fae nodded, avoiding eye contact.

Both of them glanced back at the Griffin as the creature slowly got up, disoriented and slowly moving its wings. Ilea charged up Monster Hunter, but a tap on her armored cheek stopped her.

Violence.

Talk.

“I’m not sure more violence will convince it not to attack again,” Ilea said.

The Fae tried to make her eye explode, but it failed to destroy the resilient organ. It made a few annoyed noises as Ilea giggled.

You’re missing a few thousand more of your kind to get the job done, she thought as she watched the Fae float forward a little, establishing a mental connection with the Griffin.

The creature looked up, its eyes focusing as it glared at Ilea and the Fae. It remained motionless for a moment before it lowered its head, sitting down with its wings spread to the side.

“What’s happening?” Ilea asked.

Submit.

Acknowledge.

Stronger.

“It’s submitting to me?” Ilea asked. “Or to you?”

You.

“I see. So it’s not hostile anymore. That’s good. Can you ask it if we can train sometimes when I’m around?”

Yes.

A few seconds passed before the Griffin stood up again, shaking its body before it looked at her.

“What does it want?” she asked, eating more of her meal.

Command?

“Command? Is it my pet now or what?”

Pet?

No.

The Fae touched its chin, thinking about something.

Submit.

Servant?

“Servant… Yeah, I don’t want any servants,” she said. *“Hey, Meadow, the Griffin wants to be my servant or something? Can you talk to it? Maybe it’d be willing to cooperate with you instead. Cooperate, not serve. I don’t know how smart it is exactly.”*

“What? You… how??” the Meadow asked.

“Ask Violence. I didn’t do the talking,” Ilea said, then turned to the Fae. “Can you ask if it can work together with Meadow?”

Tree?

Okay.

“Your little friend is…” the Meadow sent.

“Is what?” Ilea asked. There was no reply. *“I didn’t expect you to have the capacity to be speechless.”*

“You lack the brain size to understand what your so-called friend has accomplished here and how it did so.”

“So it’s my fault you can’t explain it easily? Alright.” Ilea focused on her food again. She knew the Fae was great with other beings. It had helped sign up the Trakorov, after all.

“Ilea… I have a request,” the Meadow said.

“What is it?”

“Can you ask the Fae if it’s willing to… teach me?”

She smiled from ear to ear. *“Oh. Now that’s just funny.”*

“I don’t think there is anything comedic about the situation,” the Endless Meadow said. *“That creature has knowledge gained through millennia of study.”*

Ilea raised her eyebrows, looking at the little Fae, then grabbed it and held it up high, the creature giggling at the gesture.

“This little guy?” she asked. *“Ancient Violence! Unmatched scholar! Knowledge beyond compare!”*

Violence giggled.

Bow.

Before.

Violence.

Ilea laughed, bowing her head to the creature as it giggled in her head.

“I guess you’re the real space god,” she whispered.

“You’re… well… you’re you. Why am I surprised?” the Meadow sent.

She smiled. *“Sorry. I couldn’t help it. I was excited that I could face a four-mark like that. There were… a lot of losses before the Krahen Isles.”*

The tree remained silent.

“And about Violence… I mean, I saw the real one, the true Fae. That was an ancient scholar-god-thing. But this little guy? He’s so cute!”

She hugged the creature close, its form nearly vanishing against her ash.

Warm.

“It’s good to see you,” she told it. She formed some heat, smiling as the Fae snuggled against her ash. She added a small blanket. “I don’t have any magic crystal cookies, sadly.”

Ash.

Fine.

The Fae somehow started consuming a part of her blanket.

“Hey, don’t eat the blanket – I can just make more ash,” she said, creating little spheres she filled with mana and some heat. The Fae quickly consumed the gifts.

Happy.

“Glad to hear it.” She patted its head, smiling to herself. “Meadow asks if you can teach it, by the way.”

Meadow.

Friend?

“Yes. You can trust it,” Ilea said.

Violence.

Help.

"Thanks," she said, making a bit more 'food'. "You don't have to stick around, by the way," she added, looking at the Griffin. "I'll be back again to fight."

She quickly used Monster Hunter, whistling to the being, trying to say thanks. The Griffin looked up and spread its wings, calling out one last time before it flew off, likely to return to a spot near the ceiling.

That was exhilarating. She looked at her hands and rolled her shoulders. *I beat it so easily. Hmm. But there's a difference between a monster like that and something like that Monarch. Or an Executioner. Hmm. I could probably take one of those now. Maybe.*

But I won't rush.

And this does feel like a big step.

Ilea looked at the Griffin's flying form. A once dangerous creature she'd had to run from.

"Violence will teach you," she sent.

"Thank you," the Meadow replied.

"Sure. But I have a slight inkling that it's not going to be exactly what you're wishing for."

"Unlike you, I have patience. Getting to talk to a part of the Fae's consciousness is a valuable step. I'm excited."

"I'm glad to hear that, Meadow. I do like connecting friends," she said, jumping up from the rock.

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FOUR

Forgery

"Had enough?" Ilea asked.

The Fae nodded, floating up to sit on her shoulder, its ashen companion joining it a moment later.

Now, who else should I visit down here?

"You've got it covered in case an Ascended shows up, right?" she sent to the Meadow.

"I'm watching, yes. But as you know, the structure at the bottom of the Descent is no longer intact."

No longer interested in this place, hmm?

"How's the Mirage doing?"

"Solving my puzzles, as usual," the Meadow said. *"I doubt your presence would further its awakening."*

"Is that an insult or a scholarly observation?" Ilea asked.

"You decide."

"The first, then. What about the Enavurin? Still asleep?"

"Yes. And I suspect it will be for some time."

Ilea looked at the two Fae on her shoulder. *"Well. I have an ancient magical being sitting on my shoulder playing with an ashen copy I made and imbued with my will. All the while, I'm talking to a living Meadow that may as well be a god. Maybe try talking with it through dreams or something."*

“Of course. I try every so often, but I’m still a novice, and my mind magic is very limited,” the Meadow said.

“That was supposed to be a joke.”

“Dreaming is simply another state of mind, one with a lot of potential. I have met Awakened with the ability to control them, to an extent. My methodical approach in conjunction with this type of mind magic is limited, especially with a creature as versed in its use as the Enavurin, as you call it.”

“Alright. Twentieth layer next?” Ilea asked, not about to try and comprehend any musings the Endless Meadow had about dreams.

A moment later, they appeared in the wastes of the twentieth layer, bits of glassy sand still visible where they had fought the Elemental.

Where Trakkie fought the Elemental. I guess the way I am now, I could’ve contributed more than a bit of healing and distraction.

“Thanks,” she sent to the Meadow, spreading her wings. She looked at the little Fae. “Feel like visiting our lava friend?”

Violence?

“Maybe some. I always need more resistances. And I imagine few can melt my heart quite like our friend here.”

Let’s.

Goooo.

Ilea smiled, speeding up toward the Trakorov’s lair. They reached it quickly and found the entrance open, waves of heat coming from within.

“It’s sleeping, I think.”

They found the massive creature rolled on its back, legs resting to the side as it breathed slowly.

“Maybe we should let it sleep and come back another time.”

Violence vanished, reappearing near the monster’s absolutely massive head before it teleported a few nearby rocks, sending them flying at one of the creature’s eyes with enough velocity to kill a low-level human.

The Trakorov made a few noises before finally opening its eyes and roaring. A wave of heat washed over them as the ground and walls shook, by which time the Fae was already back behind Ilea.

She watched in awe as the massive being rolled over with the force of an earthquake, puffing out waves of fire and heat as it slowly turned to find the intruders.

Did it get bigger?

She waved at the monster. “Hello! It’s been a while,” she said, roaring with Monster Hunter imbued with the same sentiment. “*Hello,”* she sent telepathically as well.

So many ways of communication. Can’t even imagine how many ways someone like Meadow or Violence has. How do they even find the right channel?

The Trakorov puffed, resting on its stomach as it looked at them.

“Care to burn me up a bit?” she asked.

Burn!

Burn!

Burn!

“Yes, Violence,” she said, patting the little creature.

The Trakorov just puffed again.

Ilea got a general bored vibe. *‘How dare you wake me up for this shit.’ Is that what you’re saying?*

Trade?

“What could it want from me?” she asked the Fae, creating spheres of ash, imbuing them with mana and letting them roll toward the creature. It seemed uninterested. “Okay, let me see what else I have.”

She summoned a few astral spirit corpses. “Space meat from another realm?” she asked, displacing them closer.

The Trakorov sniffed the bodies before it opened its large maw, munching on them a few times before it swallowed. The look in its eyes changed a little, and then it fell asleep once more.

“Oh well. Can’t say I didn’t try,” Ilea said. “The heat here is quite comfortable, though.”

The Fae didn’t seem done with the attempt however, touching its chin as it looked between Ilea and the large monster.

Human.

Flesh.

“You want me to feed myself to it?” she asked.

The Fae shrugged.

Yes.

“What about Fae meat?” she asked, glancing at the floating creature.

No.

Meat.

Only.

Space.

“Ah. Of course,” she said, raising her brows as she started cutting off her arms, regrowing them and cutting them off again, until she had a reasonably sized pile on the ground.

Truth.

No.

Meat.

She just nodded, continuing her bloody sacrifice. *I’m really just giving it some of my mana. Fascinating how versatile this resource is.*

Eat.

See?

Violence held out its little arm to her mouth. Ilea felt inclined to actually bite, but she just smiled instead.

“I’m just joking, little guy. I wouldn’t rip you apart to feed a Trakorov. Don’t you worry.”

It appeared on her shoulder again, touching arms with its ashen copy.

“Think this is enough for a snack?” Ilea asked, the pile of bleeding arms now reaching her chest.

Maybe.

“Maybe is fine. Let’s see.”

Ilea used Embered Core to set the pile alight, pushing it toward the Trakorov with an ashen plow.

I love this.

They waited in anticipation. Nothing happened for a few seconds until one of the creature’s nostrils twitched.

Oh?

It opened its eyes and maw at the same time, consuming the whole pile. Bones crunched for a few seconds, then it swallowed.

“Are you up for some training now?” she asked.

The Trakorov gave her a nod.

“You understand me?” she asked. This time, she didn’t get a response. “Oh well, just burn me up with a few lava spells.”

The Fae giggled and vanished, seeking refuge near the top of the Trakorov’s expansive lair.

Ilea, on the other hand, stared into the monster’s open maw, watching as lava lit up within, spreading her arms before she was showered with molten rock. Compared to the Wyrm’s sun spell, the intensity wasn’t exactly there.

“Pump it up a notch,” she said, gesturing with her slowly melting hands.

The monster obliged, and her blood was soon boiling, her skin melting. Ilea sighed, relaxing in the molten rock as the massive creature sent the occasional burst of flame over her. Nobody could ask for a more accommodating spa experience, really.

‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4
‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5

No Heat Resistance, she noted after a while, stretching as she stepped out of the pool of magma. Then she remembered there was something else.

I guess I could work on that too, while I’m here. It’s kind of embarrassing that I haven’t spent more time on it. But I was busy.

She summoned the Armaments of Trials, the massive armor thingie that Goliath had made for her. Essentially, it was just a massive statue at this point, but she had learned the General Skill Soul Perception thanks to it. Last time she’d tried to figure out more, the massive armor had shifted ever so slightly, and she hadn’t been entirely sure what to make of it.

I’ll try for a while. Trakorov doesn’t seem to mind either.

Violence?

“I’m not sure, you know, but maybe?” she answered the little Fae, then vanished into the massive statue-like armor.

She let her mana flow into the hulking thing and raised her eyebrows.

Huh. That’s different.

Her mana didn’t just cause heat to dissipate anymore, like it had the last few times. She could see it with her magic perception, could feel it with her body.

Holy shit. Is this thing fusing with my magic? It has to be because of my evolutions somehow… but no, it’s just more power. I do have more power now. Or was I this close to figuring this out? Either way, this seems fun.

She laughed to herself, though the sound didn’t leave her steel confines. Then she willed it forward, as if it were ash that she controlled.

The armor shifted.

She could hear the groaning sounds of steel as it all bent and moved to her will, animated by magic beyond her understanding.

Yeah. This is a lot more than last time. But then again, my magic is a lot stronger.

Goliath. You mad… smith. Madbeing. Madawakened.

It took a long time, minute changes happening as she kept the flow intact, her mana cycling through the metal as if it were just an extension of her body. Over the course of several hours, the massive thing shrank by about ten centimeters, the arms and legs thinning out a tiny bit as more visible joints etched themselves into the hunk of steel.

Steel mufflers grew out of the back, just behind her shoulders. Openings through the steel allowed for twenty ashen limbs to reach through and extend out of the armor, and two additional slits appeared for her wings.

No eyes formed in the two-and-a-half-meter-tall machine, but she saw well enough with her sphere. Its features sharpened as the steel slowly settled, the once boring hunk taking on the crude form of heavy full plate armor.

Ilea no longer felt like she was sitting in a steel trap but a tank.

One she could control.

Her hands reached into the open sections in the arms and grasped the handles at the end of them, the arms lengths extending by a meter beyond the ash covering her fingers.

Did he gift me some fucked up metal war machine? She grinned. *Terok inspired him after all.*

Magic surged, and steel moved.

Within her toy, now finally activated, Ilea laughed as she took her first step. She aimed for the closest wall of the cavern and took another step. Already the movement was easier, steadier.

Maybe she would've felt like the massive tank armor was incredibly impressive, but she could see the edges of the Trakorov in her sphere.

Guess it's a start.

[Armaments of Lilith – Ancient Living Quality]

Living? she thought, laughing. "Hello!"

The armor didn't reply.

It took all of her strength to take each step, and her mana regeneration was massively reduced due to the constant expense of powering the thing. Even so, she had plenty to spend.

Ilea spread her wings, pushing with all she had to lift herself.

She suddenly sped up, her legs dangling in the air until she landed, her head slamming into the stone wall with a loud crash.

Her arms moved slowly, pushing against the stone she was stuck in. Black wings, small in relation to her form, flapped to get her out.

Somewhere in the vicinity, Violence giggled.

Steam rose from the exhausts when she finally broke free, chunks of stone falling to the ground as she stumbled backward, as if in slow motion.

Ilea blinked outside the armor and watched it crash to the ground.

“Fuck!” she exclaimed, blinking back inside.

She tried Displacement instead, using it both on herself and the armor.

She appeared where she wanted to, but the armor itself didn’t even budge.

“Work in progress,” she murmured.

Ilea appeared inside the armor again and tried to roll over, using her ashen limbs, her body, and the armor itself to try and shift it. Even Violence tried to help.

With the armor stuck like a turtle on its back, she gave up and charged her wings. The sudden activation pushed her up and away from the ground, coming to a stop a few meters up.

Oh no.

She tried turning in the air, finding the maneuver possible but slow.

Ilea came crashing down, now on her stomach. Or the armor’s stomach.

The Trakorov huffed.

After about five minutes, she finally managed to stand up, slowly brushing off the rocks and debris clinging to the steel.

Living… she thought, finding her perception of the steel much more detailed than anything she had worn before. The dents weren’t only visible thanks to her sphere but also thanks to her mana perception. Or perhaps simply her connection to the armor.

Then Sentinel Reconstruction activated, and she watched in amazement as the damage was repaired.

Holy shit!

She rejoiced at the revelation and jumped with joy, only to find herself rising five centimeters into the air, landing with a *crunch* as the weight came crashing down and dug into the solid stone floor.

So weighty!

Ilea slowly stepped toward the wall, pulling her arm back before she punched with all she had.

None of her skills could be channeled through the thing, sadly, but the fist and weight alone dug into the stone as if it were sand. Chunks of rock and pulverized debris fell to the ground when she ripped her fist out of the wall.

I need a bigger hammer, she thought, summoning Quiet into her armor's hands.

That worked, at least. Her mana expenditure rose whenever she moved, the heavy hammer demanding additional resources.

"I'm not sure what you are doing," the Meadow sent.

"Enjoying myself?" she replied with a grin.

She blinked on top of the armor and watched it power down, its mana supply removed.

'ding' You have activated the Armaments of Trials bestowed to you – 1 Core Skill point awarded

Hah!

"Can't use all my skills with it… but I can heal it!"

Violence!

Dense!

"Yes, it certainly is."

It's cool. But how useful is this thing going to be?

Fire? Violence asked.

"Fire…"

She teleported back inside, charged as much heat as she could, and activated Embered Heart, only to find the spell somehow absorbed by the armor.

Hmm.

Ilea found the mana cost reduced for a little while after, but with her reserves, it didn't really matter. Next, instead of just using the spell, she sent it through her ashen limbs, the beam of energy slamming into the nearby ground without trouble.

Violence clapped.

She looked at the armor. Like some fantasy mech used to travel through space… or tunnel through the earth.

I wonder…

Ilea had to try.

She charged her wings while her ashen limbs moved in front of her, joined by more ash that quickly formed a drill. The whole thing started rotating, and she sped forward.

Crunch.

Hurt? Violence asked from outside the hole she had created in the cavern wall.

With the armor's head smushed against the rock, Ilea found herself unable to rip out her arms or legs that were embedded in the wall.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just stuck."

Instead of trying again, she simply stored the armor.

Or she tried.

The mana and heat still cycling through the machine flowed out through the exhausts, though some went back to Ilea herself. When the last of it was gone, the steel cooled down slowly and finally vanished into her storage.

"Hmm…" she murmured, blinking out of the rather sizable tunnel she had managed to dig.

Fun.

Ilea summoned the armor again and blinked inside. Her mana flowed into it without trouble, as did the heat of Embered Heart. Still, it took quite some time for the armor to charge up, ready to be controlled.

It's slowing me down a lot.

She attacked it with her own ash, cutting quite deep into the steel, then she repaired it with her healing. It was a slow process, but it did work.

"A new tool to play with?" the Meadow asked.

"Yeah. Well, it's really fucking cool, that's true. No flying or teleportation, though, and it worries me that my ash can cut into it so easily. I feel like my ash armor is stronger."

"You did recently reach five hundred."

"Yes. You're right. I guess I'll see where it could be useful."

And it's a nice gift either way. I'll have to show Goliath my progress.

My very own war machine.

She nodded to herself as Violence landed on her shoulder, then she breathed in deep and exhaled.

I should focus on more important abilities.

The Trakorov had fallen asleep at some point, either because it saw its obligation as fulfilled or simply because it was sleepy. It had been a few hours, after all.

“Can you beam me back?”

Ilea reappeared near the Meadow.

Now for my own armor.

“Is Goliath ready?”

“Yes,” the tree replied.

“Great. Violence, we’ll do some forging next. Want to watch? Maybe Goliath can make you something too if you’re nice.”

The smith appeared a few seconds later, far enough away from the Meadow not to be bothered by the mana density.

He bowed to the tree, greeting Ilea as he looked around.

“Hey there, Goliath. Watch!”

She summoned the armaments and jumped on top of it.

Goliath clapped his hands together. “Oho! You have managed to activate it. I was not sure what it would turn into.”

“Of course.” She blinked inside and activated it, then took a few steps and, slowly, twirled her heavy hammer. It almost slipped out of the large metal hand. She bowed after blinking out. “Thanks for the gift.”

“It was a small thing. I’m glad it has turned into something useful, arcane healer.”

“What in the name of all the gods am I looking at?” Iana said from about twenty meters away. She and Christopher were watching the scene with interest.

“Goliath’s creation,” Ilea said.

“What?”

“The Armaments of Trials, armor made with the heart of a mithril vein,” Goliath explained. “Only time will tell what may come of it – time and the trials the ashen one will face within it.”

“That’s more of an explanation than I got,” Ilea said.

“You wouldn’t have appreciated it anyway,” the Meadow interjected. *“The present beings are all scholars and creators, unlike the barbaric destroyer that you are.”*

She pouted, crossing her massive arms before she put the armor away once more and turned to Goliath.

“I’ve been thinking. That eye… the range is pretty nuts, but I can’t exactly aim it well. Maybe you could use some of the scales to make me a weapon of sorts, then I could place the eye in it? One with an actual scope?” Ilea formed a few rifles out of ash. “Large enough to be held by the armaments. That would be fun.”

“Interesting design… Did you encounter such creations in your travels through the wilderness?” the smith asked, the others looking on with interest as well.

“No, that’s from my home realm. We didn’t have magic, but these were called rifles. Combination of a steel barrel, gunpowder, and metal bullets.”

“Interesting. Quite simple, but it would require precise measurements and materials,” the Meadow said. *“I can see how dangerous such an instrument would be against those untrained in magic or not wearing powerful armor. Similar to the crossbows and siege weapons I have heard about.”*

“Yeah. Maybe we don’t start a weapons business,” Ilea said. “Now, for the forging. How much space do you need?”

She left her armaments where they were as she walked over to Goliath. It felt nice. As if she had a car or something. Or a mech. Just one that she powered. Which felt fun to her as well.

Maybe I can fight someone in it and they’ll finally break through, only to find me inside.

She grinned to herself.

“This space should be sufficient,” Goliath said, having floated about twenty meters closer to the cavern wall. The smith turned and squinted, his eyes opening wide a moment later. “Is that…?”

“What?”

“A Spirit of Old.”

Goliath bowed his head at the floating Fae.

“That’s Violence. Meet Goliath, the best craftsbeing I know,” she said. “Goliath, meet Violence. Part of the local Fae collective.”

The little guy waved, floating closer to the smith.

“Spirit of Old, I greet thee,” Goliath said. He summoned a pouch and emptied its contents onto the ground. “Welcome to our abode, honored guest.”

The Fae giggled, floating to the ground, where it vacuumed up the glittering dust.

“What did you just feed him?” Ilea asked.

“A customary gift. Ground mana crystals. Long have I hoped to meet a traveler such as this one,” Goliath said, his eyes indicating happiness.

Friend!

“Indeed,” Ilea said, watching the Fae appear on top of Goliath’s head.

I should get some mana crystals to feed random powerful entities I meet.

“Got any crystals for sale?”

“Not for sale, but you may have these,” the smith said, summoning a few medium-sized crystals.

“I appreciate the gift,” she said and displaced the crystals, storing them inside her necklace.

“Here is the design, Endless Meadow,” Goliath said, rolling out a plan on a stone workbench that formed below the smith’s arms. “It is appreciated.”

“Simple enough,” the Meadow said, creating several walls around their area, essentially building a workshop from scratch. *“Wouldn’t want things to start burning.”*

“Not like you couldn’t put out a fire,” Ilea said.

“I dislike the smell of burnt flesh,” the Meadow said.

A large forge formed from the ground up, the stone cracking as its density increased. The creation had several layers and openings, and when it was finally complete, it stood nearly three meters tall.

“This place is growing,” Iana said with a smile. “Back to work?”

“Yeah,” Christopher said, watching the growing setup and nodding along.

Goliath continued showing plans to the Meadow, with additions connected to the forge forming all around the central unit.

“Perhaps I should employ your services more often, Endless Meadow,” Goliath joked.

“I shall assist you whenever you require such.”

The smith laughed to himself, the sound becoming somewhat devious at the end.

Ilea watched them with a smile, glancing between the floating smith, the Fae, the crystal tree, and her massive war machine.

I’ve missed this place.

She sat down on the floor as the Fae returned to running around with its ashen copy. Ilea raised her brow when the Fae ran closer to the Meadow, giggling as it teleported around, hiding behind the crystal tree as the ashen copy floated after it.

No issue with the mana density at all. Not that I'm surprised.

She still thought it was peculiar that something so powerful wasn't even at level two hundred. Her instincts didn't scream at her whenever she was close to the creature, but she assumed that might just be from familiarity. Or it was because the Fae was inherently not very threatening.

Even the hive was more confusing than threatening. Though it likely could've removed me from existence with a single thought.

Ilea sat there and smiled, watching her strange and magical friends around her. It felt nice to know that this place now existed, to know that she could teleport here whenever she wanted.

After everything that's happened in the Descent, it's cool to know what it's become.

Goliath chucked a third of the massive Wyrm scales into the forge, stone closing around the opening.

"Now we only need something to burn," Goliath said.

"Wood should suffice, if it comes from me," the Meadow said, roots forming near the forge and growing into the openings.

"Perfect. Being of Ash, I believe you should have some heat or fire spells at your disposal. With enough time, we should be able to reach the required temperature."

Ilea was already forming heat within her. "Meadow, can your stone take my heat spell?"

"Test it here," the creature said, creating a set of walls nearby.

Ilea increased her weight and held out her arm before she unleashed a fully charged beam of fire and heat. The flames broke against the wall, flowing to the sides and above it before dissipating, revealing glowing stone with a slightly liquid surface. The wall still held, however.

"Impressive," the Meadow said. There was no sarcasm for once. The being added another layer to the forge and all the surrounding walls. *"Over time, it will melt the walls."*

"I appreciate the compliment," Ilea said with a grin.

Goliath rubbed his hands together as he went and touched the still-glowing wall. "Marvelous. Truly spectacular. There is much… I may ask of

you two. May I… hmm… may I set up a residence here, Ancient One? I know it is much to ask, but you are not bothered by the aura I exude, and you both have such useful abilities."

"I do not mind your presence, Goliath. You may reside in that section of the wall. Shall I make a copy of your workshop?" the Meadow said, pointing a root at the section it had indicated.

"An entire workshop. That would be most generous, Weaver of Space, Mother of Earth, and Giver of Life." Goliath bowed again. "Master of Heat and Ash, I may ask for thy assistance whenever you are here. From time… to time."

Ilea smiled. "You're just trying to charm everyone with your compliments," she said and walked up to the smith, taking his hand. "I'll give you a mark too, if you want. You can contact me using ten words or fewer whenever you need help with something. Works once a day."

"I would be honored," he said, his golden eyes suggesting joy. "Now… shall we begin?"

"Yes!" Ilea said, her boots digging into the earth as she walked back to her spot.

"What exactly have you eaten?" the Meadow asked.

"It's a skill. I get faster heat generation in exchange for more density."

"One positive for another positive. I fail to see the downside."

"Less speed is the downside," she said. "Less effective evasion."

"You would think you hardly require either with space magic and healing."

"Which is why I'm getting some heavy armor now," Ilea said with a smile.

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FIVE

Paths

Fire, the Fae said, appearing on her shoulder.

"Don't get too close, you might get burned," Ilea said.

Armor!

With its arms outstretched, a set of stone armor formed around the giggling Fae, its eyes soon barely visible behind the small slit of its knight helmet.

Thank.

"You will be protected," the Meadow said. *"Not that I believe it necessary."*

Armor? Violence asked, pointing at the ashen copy climbing up Ilea's back.

Stone formed around the ashen clone as it sat down next to the Fae.

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 12

Ilea smiled. As she sent a first beam into the forge, the stone closed up to make sure none of the heat escaped. She continued sending in beams every couple of seconds, and as the wood within burned, new fuel formed. The openings provided by the Meadow were now only small enough for her hand to reach in.

"It's heating up," Goliath said, touching the forge from the outside.

“Touch the stone before I open up,” the Meadow said.

Ilea did just that. Her hand sank into the stone, releasing her spell into the forge before she took her hand out again.

“Damn,” she murmured, healing her burnt hand. “Can I stay inside? This seems like good resistance training.”

“It is heat generated by yourself, with no enemy or considerable danger present. Bothering the Trakorov seems like a more reliable option,” the Meadow said.

She continued sending in heat. *Right.*

“The scales are melting,” Goliath said about fifteen minutes later, his voice vibrating through the vicinity, the smith speaking faster than he usually did.

“It’s just going to be sludge. Are you sure you can make something with that?” Ilea asked.

“I have not worked with the material before,” the smith admitted.

Fireee, Violence exclaimed, dancing with the ashen clone on Ilea’s shoulder.

“Are you trying to summon a Flame Elemental?” she asked.

“Please don’t. Everyone here except Ilea and me would die instantly,” the Meadow said.

“Eh, you could just make barriers for everyone.”

“That depends on how fast everyone burns up. It’s a risk I would like to avoid,” the tree said.

You say that like Violence could actually do that.

She blinked.

Maybe it can.

Goliath touched the drain connected to the forge. “Open it.”

Ilea saw the liquid Wyrm scales flow out into a preprepared mold. It glowed like sunlight. Once the first mold was filled, they moved on to the next, and then the next, until the smith was satisfied.

“That was the first step,” he announced. “The rest, I will work on myself.”

“How long do you think it will take?”

“A few days at least. And I will work on a design for the… rifle tool you requested.”

“Awesome. I’ll check in on you then. Or you can just send me a message.”

“I will. Now hush, I require focus.”

Ilea left the new workshop and stretched, wondering where she should go next. It felt good to not be hounded by important business for once.

Something interesting to fight, to work on my skills. Or more lessons with the Meadow.

For the time being, she returned to her Space Awareness and resistance training, using the tails she’d gotten from the Wyrm to petrify herself a little bit as well.

The Fae occasionally floated nearby, pointing at floating rocks or pieces of wood and giggling whenever she was hit by projectiles, most of them displaced and set alight with her third Class skills.

The hours passed, and Ilea found the training to be fruitful.

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2
‘ding’ Petrification Resistance reaches lvl 5
…
‘ding’ Petrification Resistance reaches lvl 7
‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 6

“That’s enough for today, I think,” Ilea finally said with a sigh, glad she had gotten a level of Space Magic Awareness out of the frustrating lessons. She didn’t really feel like her understanding had made significant progress, but the skill had gone up nonetheless. “I’ll be in Ravenhall for a while,” she informed everyone.

Leave?

“For Ravenhall, yes. I’ll train a bit with the Sentinels there,” she said.

She grinned to herself. *And I can teleport back whenever I want. Just like that. All the other changes from my evolutions are nice, but man, this one does feel the absolute best.*

Sentinels? Violence asked.

“Healers in the organization I helped found,” she explained.

Violence?

“Probably, but nothing quite as spectacular as the four-marks around here. They’re mostly below level two hundred.”

Join?

“If you want to. But you’ll have to stay hidden until we get to the headquarters. Don’t want you to get captured by someone.”

Violence.

Behave.

Ilea squinted at the creature. *No you won’t. But I have my mark. And I’m Lilith.*

“Alright, get on my shoulder,” she told it, then activated her third-tier Transfer.

The Fae appeared on her shoulder, sitting down and dangling its legs.

Murder!

“No, no murder,” Ilea said.

The Fae looked at her.

No.

Murder.

“Just training. Maybe some broken bones.”

“I will be sensing you later,” the Meadow sent, the others too absorbed by their work to reply.

“Thanks for the lessons! And it’s nice to have this anchor here for my teleportation!”

“It gives me comfort, too. A good day to you, Ilea.”

Ilea appeared in her home, displacing herself when the wooden floor cracked slightly from her weight. She spread her wings as she slowly started to get rid of the additional weight.

Fat, the Fae sent.

“You little shit.”

Her wings were unable to keep her airborne with her increased weight, so she transferred herself out of her house. Her hands dug into the cliffside, pieces of rock falling down to the ocean below. It seemed to be early morning.

As the Fae appeared behind her, giggling to itself, Ilea switched into casual clothes and leather armor, summoning a hooded cloak she pulled over her head. She added a few ashen hooks to keep it in place against the wind.

“Take that back.”

Apology.

Weight.

Good.

“Why do non-humans seem to think that way?” she asked.

Mass.

Power.

Ilea moved the ashen Fae into her hood and indicated that the Fae do the same. “Don’t call me fat again.”

Apology, it sent, drooping a little.

“I know what you’re doing. Stop it,” she said, squinting.

Violence giggled again, then vanished into her hood.

Ilea blinked her eyes.

What?

She knew the Fae was there, yet at the same time, it wasn’t.

“What did you do?” she asked, feeling its presence with both her dominion and Space Awareness. The latter’s input was more confusing than anything.

Secret.

“Alright then,” she said, her weight now down enough to allow for comfortable flight again. “If you ever feel like it, I’m sure an explanation could help with my space class. Thanks for that one, by the way. It’s literally called the Faen Valkyrie.”

Valkyrie!

Violence.

“It’s battle-focused, yes. But did you really expect anything different from me?” she asked, flying up toward the snow-covered valleys of the southern mountains. “Let’s see if we can do anything interesting with the Sentinels that you’d enjoy. At the very least, you’ll be able to make some eyes explode.”

Yes!

“Just ask them first, okay?”

Yes.

Training.

“Exactly. With you there, we’ll be able to help provide a bunch of Sentinels with Space Magic Resistance. Might be helpful. And if they meet you, they might get space-related classes, too. You adorable eldritch god creature you,” she said, flicking her hood.

The Fae giggled.

Now, I wonder what the Sentinels are up to.

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SIX

Bonding

“Headmaster… I know you mean well, but me and Mila don’t need to work with others. We’re fine on our own,” Phoebe said as she followed the man to one of the lower training hall levels.

They stepped aside when Aki rushed past.

Phoebe couldn’t help but watch him. They had learned about the Taleen machines in their lessons, but seeing a Centurion moving past her was just something else. It was entirely different to looking at drawings.

War machines made to fight elves of all things. Insanity.

“You’re free to take the Hunter exam alone, with Mila, or in a four- to six-Sentinel team. Are you ready for the Hunter exam?” the mage asked.

Phoebe looked forward again and saw that the Headmaster was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. He had started to grow out his hair. The short beard, combined with the new hairstyle, really suited him. In her opinion, that was.

“I’m not,” she answered truthfully, knowing what would follow.

Trian smiled, choosing not to lecture her today.

As long as you’re within these walls, you will take advice from your teachers. No matter your background, previous status, or level of power.

She knew there were always ways around rules, especially ones so arbitrarily applied. But Trian meant well, as did the other teachers. Most of the time. Phoebe chose not to complain, glad he respected her enough not to go into a monologue.

They met up with three other Sentinels in one of the training halls. Mila was already there and waved at her with a smile. Phoebe had seen the two other girls before, but she couldn't recall their names.

"Her, Trian? Really?" one of the two said.

The girl looked like she was in her late teens, one of the younger Sentinels around. Long, slightly curly black hair fell down her back. Freckles and deep black eyes made her face easy to look at.

Phoebe couldn't quite gauge the complaints. "What's the issue?" she asked.

The girl looked at her and grinned. "You're a cold, calculating asshole."

"Well, that was pretty blunt," Phoebe noted.

At least she's direct.

"Yeah. And I'm bluntly saying I don't particularly like you. But I guess if Trian suggests it, I can give it a try."

Phoebe grunted. "This is Ember, by the way," the smiling girl said, nodding toward the last girl.

Ember had her hood up, partly covering her face, and nearly stumbled to the side when she heard her name. Her green eyes looked at the ground, and a single brown braid came out from under the hood and rested on her leather armor by her shoulder.

"Hello," Ember said.

Mila walked over to Ember and grabbed her hand, whispering something to her. Phoebe glanced at them, her gaze resting on the two hands touching before she looked back at the girl in front of her.

[Fire Mage – lvl 22]

Ember is level fifty… and I think she's got the Medic Sentinel Class like me.

"You're very confident for someone who couldn't take any of us here in a fight," she said.

The girl pointed at herself. "We haven't fought. How would I know if you're stronger?"

Ah, she's one of those, Phoebe thought and rolled her eyes, glancing at Trian. *I can see your smirk, old man. You can't hide it.*

"This is Willa," Trian said after clearing his throat. "Willa, meet Phoebe. Ember and Mila, you both know already. None of you agreed to join a team

of more than two, which, again, is perfectly acceptable. I won't repeat the benefits of working in larger groups, however. You all know them. All I ask is that you train together for one day."

Willa sighed. "Ilea doesn't work in a team either."

Why would you bring up that demon?

"If you're as strong as Ilea, you won't have to listen to my lectures after this," Trian said. "Though trust me, I still try to lecture her."

"You're just jealous that she's stronger than you," Willa said with a smirk.

Phoebe looked at the Headmaster with wide eyes. *Too daring. You're barely level twenty.*

"Envious is the word you're looking for," Trian said. "Ilea has the wisdom to listen to the people around her. People with backgrounds and knowledge she might not possess. She trained with people and learned from them, fought and befriended beings most others wouldn't even consider talking to. Arrogance was not what led to her power."

And now she'll get angry and leave us the fuck alone. Well done, Headm—

Willa bowed her head. "I'm sorry. I'll try to work with them."

Phoebe glanced between the two. The girl's attitude had changed entirely from a confident and snarky warrior to that of a meek and subservient student.

She is quite young. Maybe she's just a little dense if she really hadn't considered the arguments he shared just now.

"What are you looking at?" Willa asked, eyeing Phoebe.

"I'll try my best to work with them. For today," Phoebe said, ignoring the aggressive girl.

Trian nodded, then looked at the other two. "Is that acceptable, Ember?"

She nodded lightly. "It is. Thank you, Trian."

Who do they think he is? Their father?

Phoebe reminded herself that many of her peers didn't come from a normal background like hers. She had started seeing violence and war once she decided to become an adventurer, but it had been her choice, the path she wanted to walk. Few were given a choice at all.

"Mila, you're fine with it too?" Trian asked.

"Of course, Headmaster," the woman said and bowed respectfully.

"You don't have to address me that formally. We're your teachers."

Mila smiled. “Which is a position deserving of respect.”

Phoebe stared at her friend. Her freckles seemed to shine in the magical light coming from above.

She’s so graceful. Like a queen.

Willa giggled, looking at her.

“What?” Phoebe snapped.

“Oh, nothing,” Willa said. “Shall we start, then? I suggest Pain Tolerance training.”

You enjoy that torture?

“And I need you healers to take care of me, otherwise I’ll die,” the girl added.

Weren’t you here ages ago? How are you still at level twenty-two?

“Got something to say?” Willa asked.

“Yes. You were here before I even joined,” Phoebe answered. “I’m a Medic Sentinel and at level eighty-two. You should have gotten your Class long ago if you’d done the normal classes and training sessions.”

Willa grinned. “Because I don’t want to become a Medic Sentinel. Do you really think a Class based on Lilith’s teachings will be able to surpass her?”

“You want to surpass… Lilith?”

The notion seemed ridiculous, especially after that display.

She must’ve never met her.

Instead of replying, Phoebe just smiled lightly.

“Same look as everyone,” Willa said.

“At least you don’t seem arrogant about it. Though I doubt you really understand how daunting that task really is.”

“I’ll leave you to it, th—” Trian began before he froze in his tracks. He looked back at the group, raising one eyebrow before he smiled.

Phoebe thought she detected an expression she hadn’t really seen on him before.

Confusion? Consternation?

“Is anything wrong?” Willa asked.

“Just give it a minute. Someone else is joining your training.”

“Another Sentinel?” Willa asked.

Phoebe glanced at Mila, their eyes meeting. *Oh no.*

“Oh yes,” Mila said.

“What?” Willa asked, looking between them. “Tell me.”

At that moment, a winged Sentinel appeared behind Trian, her wings vanishing as she landed on her feet. Phoebe took a step back, trying to control her breathing as she averted her gaze.

Trian stepped over to the newcomer, whispering to her in a tone everybody with a Sentinel Class would easily hear.

“Don’t kill them. Don’t torture them beyond anything they expect, don’t give them gold or dangerous items, don’t do anything inappropriate, and don’t feed them anything weird.”

“Trian, who do you think I am?” the demon queen said, an innocent smile on her face, piercing blue eyes peering out from below her hood. She wore simple leather armor and casual clothes beneath, looking like an adventurer at maybe level one hundred.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

How inconspicuous, Phoebe thought, catching herself staring before she focused on the ground. *Don’t take your eyes off the enemy,* she remembered, forcing herself to look at the monster again.

The Headmaster lightly punched Lilith’s arm before he made for the exit. “Enjoy yourself, students.”

Leaving us with the monster so he doesn’t have to deal with it. So that’s how it is.

“Hey, Ilea. Been a while,” Willa said casually, waving at the founder.

“Oh, Willa. You made it in after all. Congratulations. No Class yet? Are you slacking?” Ilea asked, walking closer.

“I’m working on my resistances, and I’m trying to get an ash-related General Skill. Gonna get the best Class in the Sentinels,” Willa said, giving her a thumbs-up.

“Commendable. But don’t wait too long to fight monsters. Otherwise, you’ll end up an ancient witch dying of old age in her tower because she wanted to optimize her first Class.”

Willa waved her off. “Just because you rush into things doesn’t mean I have to make the same stupid mistakes.”

Don’t insult her… Phoebe thought, slightly reaching out toward the girl.

“True,” Lilith said, smiling to herself as she looked at a nearby wall. “Well, whatever. So you all have to train together for a day because you’re loners? Oh – hey, Ember. Glad you joined as well.”

Ember bowed. “It’s good to see you’re safe, Ilea.”

They all fucking know her??

Phoebe ignored the grin plastered on Willa’s face.

“I can see there’s some tension in the room,” Lilith said. “But don’t worry, a few broken bones should help you release all that. Works for me, at least.” Two ashen copies of Lilith formed next to her, and the creatures dashed away to close the large gates to the training hall. “Can you four keep a secret?”

“Of course,” Willa said immediately. Ember and Mila nodded.

“What about you, Phoebe?” Lilith asked.

“I… yes,” she answered, annoyed that she got flustered.

“Great,” Lilith said with a smile. “I brought a friend with me today. Violence, you can come out now.”

Phoebe watched as a creature with a body as black as the night stepped out of Lilith’s dark hood, floating in the air as it held on to what looked like an ashen copy of itself. Its eyes were pure white, like two magical lamps set into an abyss. Six small wings moved on its back, while its two short arms and legs formed a vaguely humanoid shape, all entirely black and otherwise featureless. She had heard about these creatures in one of her classes.

[Fae – lvl 103] – [Excited / Violent]

Violent? Phoebe asked herself, confused. She knew the Fae were usually somewhat harmless travelers and part of a whole. If they got stuck or needed help, one might get rewarded in the future for rescuing them. She had also read enough monster manuals and talked to enough adventurers to know that all that wasn’t common knowledge.

Now we know where that piece of information came from, she thought, staring at the creature.

“It’s so cuuuute!” Willa shouted, rushing toward the floating thing and hugging it close.

The sound of giggling wafted over from the location, but Phoebe couldn’t quite place it.

Mind magic? Or is it something different?

Violence! a voice said in her mind.

Telepathy… Harmless, but I should be wary of the creature. My resistance is low.

“Violence will support us with our training today,” Lilith said, sitting down on an ashen chair that formed behind her. A meal appeared in her hands, and she started eating.

“Can I have some too?” Willa asked, patting the Fae on its head.

“No.”

Phoebe didn’t dare walk closer, though Mila and Ember were definitely braver than her, as they joined the founder.

“Of course you can,” Willa told the Fae with a smile. “Ilea is here, so just don’t overdo it, okay?”

Phoebe looked on as Willa lifted the Fae up high, the little creature giggling as the girls smiled. She took a step forward.

Maybe it’s oka—

Her thoughts froze as Willa’s eyes exploded outward in a spray of blood and tissue.

As she jumped back and activated her armor, Willa’s eyes reformed, and she glanced over at Phoebe with a confused expression.

“What?! I’m the weird one??” Phoebe blurted out.

Lilith started laughing.

“You can’t get Space Magic Resistance from just anyone!” Willa exclaimed.

Ember nodded.

“It’s true,” Mila said.

You too?

Her shoulders slumped before she felt someone grab her hand. “Mila…”

“It’s okay. Come on, Violence seems nice. It’s just excited,” the girl said, pulling her toward the monsters.

“Those who have ash magic, try to injure me,” Lilith said. “Aim for my face. I don’t want to waste another set of clothes and armor.”

We’re a healing order, right? Phoebe thought.

She looked at the Fae as it floated up in front of her face. She hesitated, then sighed. “Sure. Knock yourself out.”

Violence! the creature exclaimed.

Then her vision went dark.

* * *

Ilea sat in her ashen armchair, patting the Fae's head as she watched around sixty Sentinels writhe on the ground, her mind keeping track of their health.

"I thought Trian didn't allow group training anymore?" Sidney asked, sitting down on an armchair she'd brought with her.

"You brought a chair to watch?" Ilea asked, looking over at the Shadow.

"It's good if they associate pain with me. Just being around will help," the teacher said.

"You'd be more suited for this, then. He only agreed because everyone pestered him when they heard I was around."

"Your arcane healing. I can see that," Sidney said. "Pain Tolerance training is… difficult. To process. Normal healing helps, but it's nowhere near yours."

Demon.

Lord.

"No, I'm not," Ilea said. "I'm just helping out."

Pain.

"Controlled pain so that they can endure or ignore it when they're in a real battle," Ilea told the Fae, stopping her reverse healing on a few guys who were screaming especially loudly.

'ding' Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 8

"The people who joined early on benefited a lot from your personal training," Sidney said. "Me included."

"It does help," Ilea said, wondering how much easier all of her resistance training had been over the years, compared to people without arcane healing readily available. The second tier of Pain Tolerance made a massive difference, of course. You could just turn off the pain, but even then, setting yourself on fire or seeing yourself bleed that much was bound to leave psychological scars. With arcane healing, it didn't.

Seeing the students in pain, Ilea healed her own mind as well. It was a terrible ordeal, but one they had chosen – and one they would benefit from greatly. Watching them now, she wondered how much of her fast growth and ability to keep facing dangerous monsters time and time and time again, even after getting ripped apart and beaten to a pulp, was really just due to her arcane healing. The notes from the Azarinth Order hadn't mentioned it,

but it was perhaps the greatest benefit of the Bluemoon grass and the initial Class it had granted.

“Are there no mind mages who can help with this?”

“None willing to work with us,” Sidney replied. “And the contact you have in Riverwatch apparently refused to consider it.”

“Really? Why?” Ilea asked, glancing at the woman. She let go of Violence, and the Fae floated off and began to destroy eyes and teleport people around with reckless abandon. She had decided not to hide the little Fae after all, mostly because it now refused to sit still within her hood.

“The beauty of pain should not be disturbed, or something along those lines. I kind of agree for another reason. If pain leaves no mark, it fails to teach caution. Though obviously it’s incredibly useful to be able to ignore it. I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone who isn’t a healer, though.”

“There’s some truth in that,” Ilea said, displacing groups of people at a time to try and help them unlock their Space Magic Resistance.

Sidney nodded toward the Fae. “Not worried someone might talk about it?”

“If someone tries to do anything to Violence, they’ll have me hunting them down. Not sure why anybody would care anyway.”

“Exotic being, telepathy, space magic. Plenty to be interested in.”

“They can just ask him, then.” Ilea whistled, sending a charged use of Monster Hunter through the hall that caused most of the Sentinels to lock up for a few seconds.

“I still can’t believe I held my own against you during your Shadow evaluation,” Sidney said, immune to the call’s effect.

A student tapped the ground, and Ilea immediately stopped her reverse healing. She healed the student, focusing on his mind as he sat up and sighed. He gave her a thumbs-up a few seconds later, resuming the training.

“You can have a go at it now,” Ilea suggested with a smirk, resting her head on her hand as she looked at the woman.

Sidney waved the offer away. “I don’t need to lose any more confidence. Facing the higher-level Sentinels already does enough damage.”

“Hmm.” Ilea looked back at the Fae. The creature was flying around the hall, its ashen copy in tow.

One of the Sentinels behind her collapsed, the woman’s legs broken by one of Ilea’s ashen clones.

Not even a complaint, she thought, watching as the Sentinel teleported away, bending her legs back into alignment as the wounds closed. *I do hope we're not dooming humanity by training these people.*

"What are you thinking about?" Sidney asked.

"Consequences," Ilea answered.

Sidney chuckled. "Them? No, they're fine. No need to worry. I train and teach them every day. If any group of people was ever meant to hold *more* power, then it's the Medic Sentinels."

"I do hope you're right."

"Compared to you, they'll have an education."

"I'm getting more and more interested in a bout with you. Just to see if this combat instructor is suited for the job."

"Misusing your power to abuse followers and employees? The issues with that are covered in one of Trian's classes. Maybe you should find time to take it," Sidney said with a wink.

"I'm sure a few exceptions from time to time are acceptable," Ilea said, smiling back as she stopped her reverse healing. "That's it for now, everyone! I can only take your screaming for so long."

"Aww, really? I can gag myself!" one of the students said. "Or we could just destroy our throats?"

"Yeah, this is so much better than fire," one of the girls said, shuddering.

"I think ice is the best, to be honest," another one said, rolling his shoulders.

Ilea watched as the Sentinels found their friends and returned to their teams. Some were heading off to their classes or training, some formed a half circle around Violence to receive more Space magic training, and others joined up with the ashen clones.

"James, do you want to meditate together later?" one of the women asked, running after a guy.

Meditate. Sure.

"You alright?" Sidney asked.

"Huh?" Ilea said, looking at the woman.

"You seemed lost there for a second."

"I did? Hmm, I guess I was, yeah. Just kinda wish I could've experienced the student lifestyle for a while."

Sidney laughed. “You wanted to be a student? I doubt you’d have been one to sit in classrooms for longer than a few weeks.”

I suppose that’s true as well. But I didn’t have wings back then. Or any real magic for that matter.

“This has become a pretty nice place, hasn’t it?”

Sidney dropped the smile and nodded. “Yeah. I’m glad I took the job. These kids will go places. It’s nice that you’re giving them the chance. You, Claire, and Trian.”

“You’re here teaching them.”

“Well, yeah. But everything good needs funding, too.”

“That’s true.”

“Will you be around for a while?”

“I’ll be back in the coming days,” Ilea said, getting up from her chair. “Violence?”

The Fae appeared on her shoulder, an ashen copy forming next to it.

After seeing the Sentinels and thinking of her initial Class, there was something she wanted to check on.

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SEVEN

Steps

Ilea sped over the mountains, soon reaching the forested plains. She flew low in an effort not to attract any monsters, the marks in her mind guiding her way.

Fast!

"It is," she said, her words lost in the winds but likely picked up by the Fae nonetheless.

When she saw Karth in the distance, she slowed down, using her non-charged speed to fly the rest of the distance.

This spot is probably fine, she thought, landing atop a small forested hill overlooking a part of Riverwatch.

Transfer's enhancement had added another two anchors she could set, and Riverwatch seemed like a good spot for a fourth one. Magic lit up within her dominion as she set her fourth Transfer destination.

Close enough to both the city, Karth, and the necromancers. She looked up at the high-reaching mountain. *I wonder if Isalthar is already trying to find a way inside. Are you gathering Cerithil Hunters? How many even are there? And how powerful are they?*

She exhaled. Her evolutions had advanced her power, and she had plenty of skills to work on before she planned to face more of the Taleen war machines, but there were plenty of other things to work on, too.

Ilea briefly thought of the Monarch, wondering how she would fare now.

Badly, she concluded. *One thing at a time.*

She rushed past the city, moving through the forest with teleportation. *Can't believe this distance took me several days of running back then*.

Soon, she appeared in front of the Azarinth temple, its ruins long forgotten in the eastern Navali Forest. Her dominion now reached far below the structure, and a single use of Transfer brought her into the very chamber she had been stuck in for months.

It made her think of Earth, of Mark, of her parents, of the life she could've lived.

I'd be deep in my studies by now. If I'd chosen that path. Maybe I would've dropped out and become a fighter instead. She laughed at the thought. *Who knows. But now, I'm here.*

Her magic perception picked up some power coming from the walls. None of the grass had actually grown back, but she hadn't expected anything different. It was supposed to be a rare elixir, after all. Even if there had been any Bluemoon grass, the limitations would have made it useless anyway.

Plant? Violence asked, moving out of her hood.

"Yeah. You don't happen to be an expert vegetation mage, do you?" Ilea asked, carefully cutting into the wall with her ash, taking a piece of it out before she stored it in her necklace.

No.

Space.

Not.

Plant.

"I figured. Good thing I do have a plant friend," she mused, activating her third-tier Transfer ability.

She had the Fae attach itself to her again before they vanished, reappearing within the domain of the Meadow.

Just like that. I don't think I'll ever get tired of this. Space magic is the best!

"Hey," she said, summoning the chunk she had just gotten. *"Can you cultivate this plant? It's called Bluemoon grass, some kind of moss. When I ate it, it made my body change to something that allowed arcane healing."*

"Welcome back. You wish to use it on others?" the Meadow asked.

"Preferably in a way that doesn't kill anybody. As it was, humans had a pretty high chance of dying after consuming it. Felt fucking horrible for me

too.”

“I understand. I can work on it, but I’m not very well-versed in this realm’s vegetation. Would it be acceptable if I asked the human Lucas for help?”

“Lucas? The Elder of the Hand?”

“Former Elder. He now resides in the fifth layer, studying the vegetation and remnants of the Descent. I initiated contact a little while ago and found him to be a reasonable conversationalist, though he likes keeping to himself. Perhaps he would be interested.”

“Sure, don’t need to ask me. I don’t think it needs to be a super-secret project. If there’s a way to make a safe version, I’m happy for it to be shared around.”

“Then I will extend an invitation to collaborate on that. Perhaps some of the Awakened working to produce food on the first layer may be helpful too.”

“Just make sure nobody gets their hands on the current version. It’s dangerous.”

“Of course. I shall try to determine a way for this to be grown and consumed safely, hopefully retaining its effects on the human body. I can tell you already that something like this will only work on lower-level humans. As the body gets used to more powerful magical Classes, it rejects change to this degree.”

“That’s fine,” Ilea said. *“The main goal is for more people to be able to access the mental healing aspect; it did wonders for me.”*

* * *

A few days passed, during which Ilea worked on her Space Awareness with the two eldritch creatures and trained her other skills with both the Sentinels and the high-level creatures down in the Descent.

When she announced she was ready to leave for Ravenhall, Goliath called out to her.

“The armor – it is finished,” he said.

A set of black armor appeared near her, all of it hovering in the air. It looked rather massive. Not nearly as large as the armaments, of course, but broader than anything Ilea had worn so far. The surface wasn’t as smooth as

she had expected; instead, it was jagged and rocky, like the creature whose scales it was made from.

"Why make it look like scale armor?"

Goliath's eyes seemed to signal confusion. "Because it is."

Okay, Ilea thought. She didn't mind.

The set looked awesome. Additional ridges protected the weak spots near her neck and joints. Unlike her moderate horns, the heavy scale armor had ones nearly twenty centimeters in length. The helmet had a fairly large slit for her eyes, enough to see comfortably even without her dominion. The range of motion likely wouldn't reach her lighter sets, but this wasn't armor made to evade.

Ilea paced around the creation with a smile. "I'll look even more like a monster."

"Which is what you are," the Meadow said.

"Eh," Ilea retorted.

Monster, Violence supplied as it appeared inside the helmet, white eyes staring out from the slit.

She watched as the armor's hands moved up into a fighting pose with the help of some space magic.

I don't even know who's doing that, she thought, identifying the gear.

[Heavy Scorching Wyrm Armor – Draconic Quality]

Nice. And probably a little more durable than my Eternal Guardian armor is at this point.

Her bone set simply couldn't keep up with the spells a four-mark creature could conjure up. Ilea knew that the problem didn't exactly lie with the sets of armor themselves. For most people, it wasn't exactly feasible to fight monsters that shredded through hundreds of sets of armor and the flesh below. If the scales had anywhere near the durability the Wyrm had shown, she might've just gotten her first set that could withstand the rage of a four-mark being.

She made the set vanish and summoned it around herself. The gear wasn't made to be individual pieces someone could put on normally but a connected set only to be summoned directly around one's body. Her hand closed into a fist, the fingers each covered by what seemed to be individual scales moving into each other as she opened her hand again.

“Feels nice,” Ilea said, looking at the Fae appear on her hand.

Large.

“It is, right?” she said. “I hope it can withstand all my spells.”

“It will recover, should it be damaged,” Goliath said.

“Care to test it quickly, Meadow?” she asked, displacing herself closer to the tree.

It formed a few walls for her to hit, and Ilea used her mana intrusion abilities, changing her punches to pure physical damage and sending waves of arcane magic and cinders over the stone creations.

The integrity of the gauntlets didn’t seem in question; the material didn’t show the slightest signs of wear. When she released heat into one of the walls, the energy formed right above her armor, much like it had with the other sets she had worn before. Flare of Creation also manifested the same way as it did on her ash armor.

Overall, she seemed to be able to use her abilities without any downsides. Her movements were just a little bit limited, and she could feel the bulk more than the weight – that was something she’d have to get used to.

With an added four layers of ash armor.

“Let’s see how durable it is on the defensive side,” she said, and the Meadow formed a large stone spear a few meters in front of her.

The projectile impacted her, breaking against the scale armor. The next one was deflected to the side, and the one after that made her stumble slightly. Each caused her momentum to increase significantly. The fourth spear made her slide back a few meters, the tip sticking inside the new set but not penetrating all the way to her skin.

“Seems pretty good,” she said as the next spear punched through her chest, stopped by the armor on the other side. “Was that necessary?” Ilea asked as she ripped the projectile out and tossed it to the side.

“We need to test the regeneration,” the Meadow said.

“Of course we do. But I don’t need it to tank attacks from creatures at your level,” Ilea murmured.

“You have long proven that you need your defenses to withstand attacks from any creature. Even those as powerful as I am.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Look, it’s already recovering!” she exclaimed.

“Perhaps because it is much thinner than the original scales,” Goliath mused.

“It’s probably too slow for a prolonged battle, but it’s a lot faster than the bone armor I used before,” she said. “Can Iana enchant it as well?”

“I will ask,” the Meadow said.

“Thanks!”

“The… rifle tool requires another day,” Goliath said. “But I am confident about this version.”

“There have been versions already?”

“I helped with testing,” the Meadow said.

“Cool, thanks. I’ll be around, then.” Ilea looked at the Fae. “I’m going back south. You coming?”

The Fae shook its head.

Return.

In.

Time.

“You have something more interesting to do?” she asked, crossing her arms.

Yes.

Important.

Work.

Ilea squinted. *Sure you do. You’re just bored of teaching me.*

Violence!

“Violence to you too. Come around when you feel like it, you’re always welcome,” Ilea said with a smile.

Friend! the creature exclaimed, then it vanished.

“Magnificent… Instant long-range teleportation… untraceable… perfect manipulation. It’s almost like… no… I’ll have to see it again,” the Meadow murmured.

“You’re never as interested in my long-range teleportation,” Ilea said.

“Child’s play compared to the Fae. This realm is truly blessed,” it said, magic surging up as it seemed to do its own testing.

At that moment, Ilea received a message from Claire.

“Can we talk about Healing Orders? Anytime you’re available.”

Healing Orders? Hmm. Sure.

“Will be there soon.”

She looked over at the Meadow. *“I’ll be in Ravenhall for a while, I think. I’ll be back soon. Send updates on the gates and armor if anything comes up or if I’m needed.”*

“We will,” the Meadow answered as Ilea activated her third-tier Transfer.

She quickly checked her messages while flying to Ravenhall.

‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2
‘ding’ Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 23
‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 22
‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 6
‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 7

So many projects going on at the same time. Hmm. Healing Orders, then. Did they finally get in touch because of the Medic Sentinels?

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EIGHT

A Tense Welcome

When Ilea joined Claire in her office, she was surprised to find Trian present as well.

“Glad you could make it,” Claire said.

“Sure. So, Healing Orders, what’s this about?” Ilea asked.

Trian and Claire exchanged a glance. “Do you want to explain?” Claire asked.

“I can. Probably best to explain the situation in detail, but to summarize, you’ve got an invitation to Halstein, the capital of Kroll, and the current seat of the Corinth Order.”

“The one whose member tried to poison me once? And another worked with those smugglers? That Corinth Order?”

“That’s the one. The Medic Sentinels have grown in power quickly, and they’re out there on missions. The war with Baralia, coupled with Ravenhall’s recent independence, delayed a lot of things, it seems. The change in management in Dawntree would’ve slowed things down as well, but it was only a matter of time until the established Healing Orders took notice. I could go with some of the faculty, but obviously, there are a lot of whispers about you. And more importantly, we think it could be a trap.”

“A trap?” Ilea asked.

“They’re too nice,” Claire said. “I’ve looked into it, and the Corinth Order has previously been incredibly demanding and haughty in the way they corresponded with the government of Ravenhall. The city has always

had a strange relationship with Healing Orders, though the Order of Balance had some representation due to the ties with Lys. They haven't been eager to reestablish an outpost after the demon summoning. But I digress. The Corinth Order has invited the founders of the Medic Sentinel Corps to Halstein, though they specifically mentioned Lilith."

"Michael is from there, isn't he?" Ilea said. "Do you think he's got anything to do with this?"

"I think it's unlikely. Michael is somewhat connected to the government in Kroll, but he doesn't have major dealings with any of the Healing Orders, at least as far as we know. The Corinth Order was far more entrenched in Dawntree – we don't expect them to have a lot of influence in Kroll as of yet."

That's good. I hope I don't run into him while I'm there.

She nodded. "And you want me to spring the trap? Like I've always done."

"If there is a trap, then yes," Trian said. "But it's not just that. You know you're still the same Ilea to me that you've always been, but let's not ignore the obvious. You're a three-mark human. The only one we know of. You faced an army even before rising to your current power, and at this point, I don't really know how to evaluate what you could do."

Ilea breathed out. "Yeah? And what exactly does that mean for this meeting?"

"I guess it depends on who you want to be. And how involved you want to be. But if you go there, be it a trap or not, if you meet the other Healing Orders and they learn what you can do, or get a general measure, it could shape our negotiations for the future. It could change how the Sentinels are perceived and how much resistance we will face going forward."

"A show of force, hmm? Make them play nice?"

He's not wrong. I did intervene in Riverwatch. And I've grown substantially since then, haven't I?

"A show of presence, maybe. Of power. Maybe don't start any big conflicts," Trian said.

Ilea gave him an amused look.

"We've built your name," Claire said. "Lilith. The rich and powerful ashen Shadow. As these things tend to go, your status as a mythical figure has taken on a life of its own, but with your more recent advancements, I don't think any of the stories or songs are exaggerated, not anymore."

“And what would I be doing, exactly? How do I use Lillith to help us?”

“Just meet them, see if there’s a trap. You could have a chat and find out about our future prospects of cooperation and conflict. And then we could talk about you meeting up with the Order of Balance, too. They’ve certainly shown an interest. I know you’ve said plenty of times that you’re not interested in politics and meetings like these—”

“No,” Ilea cut her off. “I mean, yes. I guess I’m not looking to be involved *too* much.”

She paused. Meeting up with Helena had felt like a necessity. And Claire was right – she didn’t want to get involved in the way that Felicia did. But this time, it felt different.

Maybe because it’s not about countries or economics. It’s about the Sentinels.

She thought about how Nathan had unlocked his Class back in that cave. He had been the first of them.

And they’re growing so quickly. All with their own history, their own reasons. And we can empower them to do so much more.

Ilea realized in that moment that if another Order threatened the Sentinels, she would step in – and she would go as far as she had to.

Interesting. I mean, yeah, obviously I care about them.

And it means I can check out the competition.

“I’ll check it out, yeah. I’m one of the founders after all, right?”

Trian smiled. “That you are.”

“And it sounds like a fun trip. I can finally check out some more of Kroll. All I’ve seen is a dungeon. I can meet with the Order of Balance, too, if you want to arrange something.”

I am a three-mark, but these Orders are old. Who knows if I’m really the only one around in these parts? Isalthar could hide his three marks, and so can I.

“Good. I’ll get in touch about that, then. Before you rush off, can I give you an update on the Healing Orders and on the stances they have on the Sentinels?”

“I’m listening,” Ilea said.

“Alright. So, our timing with the Sentinels, coupled with their rapid progress, has let us move mostly unhindered. Ravenhall and the Shadow’s Hand stand behind us.

“Let’s start with the one at hand, the Corinth Order. They’ve turned out to be far less of a problem than we expected. Their resources were greatly reduced due to the rebellion in Dawntree and the expulsion of their Order from the city. Their influence was greatest there beforehand, and now they’re working to increase their foothold in Halstein and Kroll.

“The Order of Truth is officially gone due to the blood rituals and the end of the war between Lys and Baralia, but their healers and temples remain. Lys and the Order of Balance are interested in the remains of course, as are many others, but some higher-level healers want to reform the Order internally as well. I’ll keep you informed once we learn more. The Sanctuary Healing Order from Stormbreach vouches for us, which leaves the Order of Balance.”

“They’re the biggest one, right?”

“The biggest one that remains, yes. Before the war and the rebellion in Dawntree, Balance and Truth were estimated to have a similar influence, with the Corinth Order only somewhat behind. The Order of Balance is well established within Lys, and while they’ve expressed an interest in getting to learn about the Medic Sentinels, they’ve not pushed for anything, nor have they sent a direct invitation to you.

“We believe they’re waiting to see how Lys will handle their relationship with Ravenhall before deciding on how to proceed. That, or they simply don’t see us as competition or a problem to begin with. I think if we initiate proceedings and you meet them, we could remove any uncertainties in our future relationship.”

“Have they been as aggressive as the other two big ones in how they’ve treated healers?”

“Not quite. While the Corinth Order has unofficially gone so far as to threaten and kill unaffiliated healers in their self-claimed territory, the Order of Balance simply approaches and creates incentives for healers within the Empire to join up. Though it’s difficult to define how much pressure they truly put on unaffiliated healers. They’ve certainly made efforts, financially and through the Empire itself, to prevent other healing organizations from gaining a foothold.

“They are, of course, more than considerate compared to Baralia, where any practice of healing magic outside of the Order of Truth was strictly forbidden and punishable by… whatever a prosecutor found reasonable that day.”

“Sounds like we really chose the perfect timing then,” Ilea said.

“Pretty much,” Trian chimed in. “Well, one of the main considerations was our independence from Lys. As a result, Balance has even less sway over decisions made here. We expected pressure from the others, but no outright sabotage or attacks due to our backing from the Hand. Though, yes, we’ve certainly benefited from what happened in Dawntree and Baralia.”

Ilea nodded. “And now they’ve finally come knocking. At least the Corinth Order. And there’s interest from the Order of Balance. I can go and test the waters, if you’re both fine with that, and show off some of our capabilities if necessary.”

“It would bring me peace of mind,” Trian said. “I don’t want either of them, or anyone else, to think they can afford to antagonize any Sentinels out there. Those allowed to go on missions can certainly fend for themselves, but I want them to be able to move freely and focus on why we established the organization instead of dealing with politics.”

“Yeah. I agree on all that. We want more capable healers out there. Ones who can handle a monster infestation as well. I’ll establish contact with both Corinth and Balance and see what they want. I’ll try not to escalate things too much if there’s a trap waiting for me.”

“Only if you’re comfortable with going there. It could be dangerous,” Trian warned.

Ilea grinned. “You know what, Trian? I really hope it is, though from what I’ve seen so far, the most dangerous thing I expect from them is a headache.”

* * *

Donnavon looked at his reflection in the small mirror, the warm candlelight casting shadows on his face. *Your age is showing*, he thought, brushing his long white hair back before saying a short prayer. He cleaned his hands and sighed. Today could very well be the most important day of his life.

He checked his gown and slipped into his comfortable shoes. One of the few luxuries he allowed himself. There were no rules against such, especially as a High Cleric, but he thought it hypocrisy to pray to Friede while living a life of luxury.

Do not judge your brothers and sisters. They are as devoted as you.

Donnavon had thought that perhaps the latest struggles the Corinth Order had gone through were merely a test. A sign that they had left the ways of Hella and Friede. It was not his position to judge them. The gods would guide their way, one way or another. He would trust their guidance.

“May you protect me from the evil of this world,” he murmured, one hand to his heart as he closed his eyes.

A knock on the door signaled that it was time.

“High Cleric, may I enter?” asked a young man from the other side. The sound of his voice made Donnavon smile.

“Come in, Bryce,” he said.

The young Paladin entered gracefully, every one of his movements a testament to his power and expertise in battle. His heavy white plate armor hardly seemed to bother him. He went down to one knee as soon as he entered, long blond hair falling down his back.

[Divine Paladin – lvl 305]

Donnavon felt pride swell in his heart. “Stand, Bryce. You do not need to kneel before me. It is you who goes into the wilderness to battle the creatures who would seek our death. I am merely a servant, healing those in need and tending to this temple.”

Bryce looked up and smiled. “You are far too humble. I’m only giving you the respect you deserve,” he said and stood up, closing the door behind him. “You know why I came.”

“The fateful meeting. Yes.”

“You don’t have to be the one to meet with her. Let me go in your stead.”

Donnavan touched the man’s shoulder and shook his head. “It must be me. Let me show her the heart of our Order and what we stand for.”

“What if the rumors are true? What if the songs hold merit? What if she truly is a monster corrupted by evil, selfishly purging those she deems unworthy or unjust?”

“Those are not the full truths of what I’ve learned of her. Has she not helped free Ravenhall of the demonic plague? Has she not fought in Virilya alongside the imperial army? Her exploits in Baralia do not tell of a monster. Not entirely, at least.”

The Paladin gave him a doubtful look. “Songs can easily be bought, information spread by those who won the war. You know how much influence her gold has bought. It reaches all the way to Riverwatch. The Inquisitors whisper that she funnels her wealth even into Dawntree. Some say the fall of the city was partially her doing.”

And how often have we done those same things, I wonder? Donnavon thought. He had faith in his brothers and sisters in the Order, but it couldn’t be denied that he was kept out of important discussions, their nature colder by the year. He wondered if things would be different if Wurt were still alive.

“If we are to meet her, it has to be with an open mind,” Donnavon said. “And if she truly is the monster so many in our Order deem her to be, we need you to be ready. You and everyone else. Her influence cannot be understated. We cannot allow a monster to lead an order of healers. We both know this, but we must prevent further bloodshed. So many of our own have died already.”

Bryce put on his helmet and gave him a nod. “Hella be with you, Donnavon. I will pray that our intervention won’t be needed.”

Donnavon smiled. He didn’t miss that Bryce had failed to mention Friede. Today, he chose not to point it out. The principles of devotion and sacrifice carried a different weight before meeting a monster, after all. Especially the latter.

“Will you meet her here?” Bryce asked.

“In the eastern temple. Her welcome has been prepared. These grounds have been deemed too plain to welcome someone of her reputation,” Donnavon explained. He was surprised the Paladin didn’t know about it.

Before he could say anything more, he heard the sound of the heavy footsteps of another Paladin resounding in the hall outside.

“Bryce! Trouble in the north! Break in – a few wounded and culprits on the run,” a female voice called.

“Naomi, lower your voice,” Bryce said, opening the door. “We’re on holy ground.”

“Of course – apologies, High Cleric,” the woman said, bowing to Donnavon as they stepped out into the hall.

Bryce turned to Donnavon one last time and touched his shoulder, not saying another word before he made his way toward the open gate. Naomi watched her fellow Paladin leave before she glanced at the High Cleric.

“I…” she started, looking at the walls before she turned back to him. “May Friede and Hella bless you today.”

Donnavon bowed his head lightly before they too left through the open gate at the end of the hall, only catching a glance of the Paladins as they spread their wings, flying northward.

Paladins of the Corinth Order hunting petty thieves. They could be doing so much more.

That was a battle for another day, Donnavon thought, greeting the pair of Inquisitors waiting for him.

He prayed for his protectors.

None would have dared lay their hands on a healer of the Corinth Order even ten years ago, but times were changing. Refugees from the west and now Baralia had flooded Halstein. Desperation pushed people to do unspeakable things.

It was these people who needed help the most, but he would not deny reality. Other members had already been abducted, either to work for criminals or forced to join a team of adventurers who had soon left the city. That was why the Orders had been formed, why healers needed to be part of one.

The walk to the eastern temple was short, Donnavon healing a few people who noticed his white gown on the way. His guards didn’t interfere this time, though he wasn’t open to conversation either, as per usual.

“Lilith has arrived!” a young teen shouted to one of his friends, the two running off to see the downright legendary figure.

Never has she set foot in this city, yet the people think her a savior, Donnavon thought. *Did she come in answer to our summons? Or to bring her influence and power down onto our weakened Order?*

When they arrived at the eastern temple some time later, Donnavon looked up at the high-reaching marble building. White and red banners hung from its façade, and a rich carpet had been rolled out all the way onto the street. Inquisitors and Paladins patrolled the area, sending away those seeking help.

All for a pretentious welcome, Donnavon thought, gritting his teeth as he deliberately avoided the carpet.

His temple was plain, but what they had done to this building seemed almost preposterous. One might think they were a military order, not one meant to heal. He endured it, if it was to receive an important guest whose

cooperation may be vital to the future of their Order. He had volunteered to receive their guest, as had others, but it was he the Speaker had chosen.

“Welcome, High Cleric Donnavon,” Emilia said, most of her face covered by her white hood.

“Greetings, High Cleric Emilia,” Donnavon said, bowing lightly. He wondered why none of the other High Clerics had come. Perhaps it was a security concern.

Though, surely, with all these guards, nobody would be foolish enough to start a battle here. Not even her.

A few of the Paladins present were above level two hundred after all, a level of power even a group of Shadows wouldn’t want to challenge. He looked up at one of the banners, sunlight reflecting off the perfectly white fabric.

What if it’s all true? An army could not stop her. Who are we to stand against her?

He closed his eyes in prayer, feeling his heart waver at the unknown.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?” Emilia said. “Are we not beyond these petty displays of wealth and power?”

Donnavon looked at her and smiled. “We must speak in a language those around us understand. If this is what is necessary, then so be it.”

“I hadn’t expected you of all people to give up on our principles so easily,” the woman retorted, giving him a look of pity. “I shall pray for your safety, High Cleric. May you pave a way for our continued prosperity.”

They bowed to each other, the woman remaining near the entrance as Donnavon entered the temple. He was still being escorted by the pair of Inquisitors, who led him through the temple’s halls and down to the extensive basement. Paladins and Inquisitors alike nodded his way as he passed, some saying short prayers or words of encouragement. He could feel the tension in the air. Obvious, of course, considering the guest.

I wonder if there’s even been any ‘prosperity’ in the last few decades, he thought, entering a large windowless room, with only a luxurious wooden table and two leather chairs standing within.

“Is there any reason this meeting isn’t happening in the main hall?” he asked one of the Inquisitors.

“I’m afraid it would be a security concern, High Cleric,” the man explained. “Should Lilith be hostile, our chances will be significantly better

down here. Defensive enchantments protect the whole temple, but especially this room."

Donnavon sighed, sitting down in one of the chairs. He could faintly see the magic flowing through the walls around him.

There's hardly a more dangerous place to face a monster. Friede, be with me.

He meditated for a while until a Paladin entered, setting down a tray. A teapot rested on a heating plate with two mugs next to it.

"She will arrive shortly," the Paladin said, her voice cracking slightly before she left again.

Excited for battle? Donnavon thought, unsure how he should categorize the inflection in her voice.

He waited, and the Paladin's footsteps were soon replaced by those of several people walking down the hallway.

"Your conversation will of course be secure," he heard Emilia say, her voice coming closer. "Various enchantments have been placed in the room. I'm sure you understand the precautions."

"Of course," a female voice answered, the tone almost sounding bored.

Emilia stepped inside a moment later, followed by a woman dressed in black cotton pants and a white shirt. She didn't wear armor, nor did she show the horns and wings mentioned in many songs and stories.

Donnavon was a little taken aback by just how normal this woman looked. He wondered for a moment if they had sent a lookalike, but the idea seemed utterly ridiculous to him. And they would've done checks.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

He smiled, knowing that she was well over level three hundred. Higher than Bryce by at least ten levels, maybe even more. This was the real Lilith. Black hair fell down her back, loose but orderly.

"If you require anything, just knock on the door," Emilia said with a smile. Then she stepped out, the heavy stone door closing shut a moment later.

Lilith turned around, brushing a hand against the door before she looked at the walls. Finally, she plopped down on the spare chair in a casual manner and smiled, blue eyes focusing on Donnavon.

“Welcome to Halstein, Lilith of the Medic Sentinel Corps,” he said, copying her smile. This wasn’t what he had expected at all. If anything, she looked like a young rural woman, visiting Halstein for the first time. “I do hope your trip was safe.”

“You’re not aware, are you?” she asked, leaning forward slightly.

“What do you mean?”

Lilith’s smile broadened. “Oh no. I mean, I heard you had a goddess of sacrifice or something, but this just seems cruel.”

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NINE

Negotiations

The woman glanced around the room again. “My trip was fine. It’s really not that long of a flight,” she said. “Tea?”

Donnavon chuckled nervously. “Am I not the one who should offer?”

“I wouldn’t want you to get up for no reason,” Lilith said, the two cups from the nearby cupboard suddenly appearing on the table.

What? She teleported them? It’s true, then. Space magic.

“You seem surprised,” she said, pouring the hot liquid into both cups.

“It’s a rare talent. I had speculated that it may be part of one of your Classes, but it seems confirmed now. Space magic, am I right?”

Lilith drank from her mug, closing her eyes as she first sipped the tea and then downed the whole cup. “Tasty,” she exclaimed. “Yes, it’s space magic.”

Donnavon smiled, thanking her as he took the mug. Most adventurers had Heat Resistance abilities. For someone at her level, near-boiling tea would hardly pose a threat.

“I will be honest with you, Lilith. I expected something different,” he said as he took a sip of tea.

‘ding’ You have been poisoned by silk womb spice – -328 health per second for one minute

“What… what’s the meaning of…” Donnavon said and coughed. He started healing himself, but he felt his mind wavering, his vision blurring.

Why would… did she…?

His mind suddenly cleared as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown onto him, a tide of incredible power flowing into him from all around.

“What…”

“You really didn’t know,” Lilith said. “No change in your heartbeat, and you didn’t even hesitate drinking that tea.”

“No… it couldn’t be… It was you… with your space magic… You poisoned the tea…” he murmured, knocking his chair to the ground as he stumbled to his feet.

“Calm down,” the woman said, resting her head on her hands. The words flowed out with magic attached to them, reverberating in the room as if she had shouted.

‘ding’ You have heard the call of Lilith – You are paralyzed for five seconds

“Why would I poison you? Come on. I agreed to come into this room because it was such a laughably obvious trap. You’re the only reason I haven’t slaughtered everyone waiting outside yet,” Lilith said. “Sit down.”

Donnavon gulped. Looking behind him, the chair that he’d knocked over was now back where it had stood before, and he took a seat.

“Gods, you’re still unsure? Can you not see all the enchantments placed in the walls? Reinforcements, anti-teleportation, even anti-space magic, though those are laughable. You should get better enchanters. And plenty of explosion things as well, reminds me of the runes a friend uses. Plus a bunch of stuff I don’t know. All seems tied to an attempt to teleport or break out. In case the poison didn’t kill me first, I guess. At least we really seem to have privacy. I’m not sure who they wanted to prevent from hearing us talk.”

Then it all clicked for Donnavon, his heart hammering as his hands started shaking. The guards, the temple, the absence of the High Clerics, the basement. But why?

He gritted his teeth. He knew why. It was just as obvious as the rest.

“Please, Lilith. You have to listen to me. Don’t start this battle, I beg of you,” he said and bowed as deeply as he could while sitting in his chair.

The woman cocked her head to the side. “I already told you, I came in here because it seemed interesting. Honestly, I expected more from the Corinth Order. But to be fair, the experiences I’ve had with your healers should’ve been a precedent. Also, technically, you already started the battle by poisoning this tea. I doubt you would’ve known about my preferences in that regard. It’s way too weak.”

Donnavon’s mind raced. So far, she seemed calm, but he could tell that his woman wasn’t joking. She had downed the poisoned tea, apparently knowing what it was. She was perfectly relaxed, despite knowing that all those Paladins and Inquisitors were waiting outside, ready to fight her.

She can kill them all. The stories are all true. And we just doomed our Order by dealing the first strike.

You have to calm down. She’s still here, but who knows how long she’ll stay. Hella, I pray you’re by my side.

“I didn’t know. It was obvious all along now that I sit here, but…” He gulped, trying to control his shaking hands. He exhaled and managed it. “I never thought it possible. A betrayal like this. It’s… Our leadership is not acting in line with our principles. Not anymore.”

His eyes darted around as he tapped the wooden table between them. “This is an attempt on your life. But not just yours.”

“Yeah. I mean, they don’t seem to particularly like you either,” Lilith said.

“I don’t know who has chosen this path, but this is not what the Corinth Order stands for. This was an attempt on my life, just as much as it was one on yours.”

“Couldn’t they have come up with a less convoluted plan? No offense, but you don’t strike me as a fighter.”

He gulped, then nodded. “I’m not. But I have close ties to Bryce, the Head Paladin of our Order.” He raised his eyebrows in understanding. “They wanted you to kill me.”

“So that he’d attack me? What’s his level?”

Donnavon felt conflicting thoughts and emotions. His principles were clear, however. Evil must be defeated, and so far, Lilith had given him less reason to believe she was the enemy than his brothers and sisters. Those of them who had planned this terrible plot, at least.

“He’s above level three hundred,” he admitted. Perhaps he hoped his honesty would persuade her, or even intimidate her, though the latter he

thought unlikely.

“Like close to three hundred? Or much higher?”

“Much higher?” he asked. “What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t sound particularly dangerous, then,” Lilith said. “You don’t have someone higher? Some hidden leader who’s a four-mark?”

“This is… ridiculous… Our Paladins can challenge Shadows,” Donnavon deadpanned.

“Not exactly a testament of incredible strength. Why not retake Dawntree, then? Sounds like you had the necessary people.”

What is she planning? If I reveal more… No. She hasn’t lied yet, I’m sure of it. I mustn’t break her trust. The poison was real. The clues are obvious. If I deny this, I will die, and so will Bryce. It may be my last hope.

“Bryce chose to retreat to protect the survivors,” Donnavon explained. “We lost many in the chaos. The Paladins are the reason we made it to Kroll. There are ongoing discussions about an assault, but some of the High Clerics and higher-level Paladins are against it. We don’t have the numbers anymore. It’s paramount that we rebuild the Order here, instead of losing more people in a pointless war. Though it all depends on the Speaker.”

“Is the Speaker your leader?”

How does she not know this?

“Yes, Speaker Nathanael. Important decisions are voted on by the High Clerics, but I’m sure he could force nearly any decision at this point.”

“Like an attempt to kill me, and you in turn, and get the people still on the fence on his side? With a war against Ravenhall and the Sentinels?” Lilith suggested.

Donnavon shook his head. “It would be ridiculous. Even if such a battle went in our favor, it would devastate our Order – and yours. Please, Lilith. I wish to find a way to prevent bloodshed. Too many Corinth healers have died already.”

“Seems like you have a problem with your management in that case. If you tell me where they are, I can take care of them right now,” Lilith said, her voice calm.

“No… that’s not... those responsible must be found and judged, but please… if you go out there and start killing, you’ll play right into their hands.”

She looked at him for a long moment, seeming to consider, then she blinked her eyes.

“Alright. Well then, maybe we can start over. Please call me Ilea,” she said with a smile.

He gulped.

“Start over? Start what over? This is… a diplomatic incident…” he murmured. “Kroll could be brought into a war with Ravenhall. Surely Nathanael didn’t plan to use our Order in this ordeal.”

“I’m fine with a diplomatic incident. But right now, we’re still just in this room. I’m sure your friends out there will wait for a while before they manually activate the enchantments or check if we’re still alive in here,” Lilith said. “Now, you seem like a mostly decent fellow. I will just assume that, no matter how this goes, I’m talking to the new Speaker of the Corinth Order right now. Congratulations on your promotion.”

“The Speaker is chosen by the High Clerics,” Donnavon said slowly.

“Well, I don’t think there will be any left to oppose this decision once we’re done,” Lilith or Ilea said.

He shivered. “What do you suggest? Also, shouldn’t we have this talk after this situation is dealt with?”

“Why? It’s going to be chaos one way or the other. It’s calm here. We have poison tea, enchantments threatening to blow you up, and about a hundred tense fanatics waiting out there for a monster to emerge.”

Donnavon sat back, taking in a deep breath. “We’re not fanatics.”

Lilith just pointed at the surrounding walls, then poured herself another mug of tea and sipped on it.

* * *

“Not all of us, at least,” the man corrected himself.

Ilea took another sip of the tea. It was a bit weak, but the taste was growing on her.

“Good. So, I received an invitation from your Healing Order,” she said. “To be honest, I expected something like this, but it turned out more productive than I thought. At least they gave me someone worth talking to.”

“What did you… expect?” the man asked, nearly holding his breath.

[Pure Healer – lvl 204]

Many of the warriors waiting outside were around his level, about half below two hundred. She had been surprised that nobody had managed to pierce Monstrous to figure out she was a three-mark; either that or they simply hadn’t believed what they saw.

She liked this guy, though. His long white hair, the wrinkles, his modest clothing, the tragic way he’d been betrayed by his fellow brothers and sisters. Honestly, given what she knew of the Order, the fact that they wanted him dead was a point in his favor. Plus, for the situation he was in, he remained pretty calm.

Well, his pulse was all over the place, but that was to be expected. It felt like he had come in here ready to die, killed by the monster he thought she was. And even now, he was just trying to prevent a slaughter.

“A slaughter,” she answered. “But I’m glad I got to talk to one reasonable person before things went to shit. Without you here, the outcome would’ve been… very different.”

She laughed.

Your plan backfired spectacularly. And now I have an inside man ready to spill the beans while pressured to find a diplomatic solution. Reminds me of a certain Truth-related Order. Let’s just hope they’re not quite crazy enough to sacrifice the entire city.

She refilled her mug and took a sip, getting a little more serious.

“So, how do we proceed?”

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TEN

Trust

“I could break you out,” she said.

Donnavon could feel the allure. It would save his life, but if he wanted to prevent their Order from descending into chaos entirely, Lilith’s involvement had to be minimal. And they had to make sure the crown was informed. If he was honest, it wasn’t just about whatever the Speaker was planning to do. No, at this point, it was a matter of pride.

“If we cannot purge our Order of corruption ourselves, what legitimacy do we even have?” he asked, looking up at the calm Shadow.

“So I assume you don’t want me to break out of here and kill everyone?”

“As much as it would seem to delight you to do so, no. You made a comment about the space magic runes placed on this room being somewhat… lacking. Am I right in assuming you have a way to leave this place unnoticed?”

She smiled. “You still think me a monster. Oh well. Yes, and you’re a very, very lucky one. I can get both of us out of here. Though my perception is cut off. At least they managed that. You’ll have to guide the teleport.”

“I know the area. There are plenty of houses for cover. Though the Inquisitors might detect us. How far can you move us?”

“Far enough.” She looked around. “I assume you have a plan beyond just getting out of here?”

“I have to find the Head Paladin. Bryce. With a High Cleric and the highest-level Paladin on our side, we can at least make a convincing case. But most of all, I want to prevent bloodshed. And for that, we need to inform not just the people in my Order, but the King of Kroll as well.”

“Great. Sure. The King.” She sighed, then smiled slightly. “Do you have a way for us to talk to royalty?”

“Not a concealed one. But Bryce might be able to help with that. I know he regularly trained with Joel Fiore, a member of the royal guard.”

“Alright, then let’s go find this Bryce character,” Lilith said and stood up. “Close your eyes.”

Donnavon did as she asked without question. She was his only chance both to get out of this room alive and to prevent a potential war involving the remaining members of the Corinth Order, whoever they managed to bring to their side from the nation’s government, and Ravenhall.

He heard something rip into flesh and winced at the sound. “What are you doing?” he dared ask.

Lilith didn’t speak for a few seconds. “You can look again now,” she said.

When he opened his eyes, he staggered back, his eyes widening as he stared at the body parts in front of him. It was her, the remains of the same clothes she had worn moments before still visible in places. In her place now stood two horned, shadowy creatures.

“Hella, receive this servant without prejudice, your name—”

He stopped when he saw the same blue eyes staring at him.

Only one has eyes… They’re… ash.

“Not going to finish your prayer?” Lilith asked. “I hope these traps are enough to burn away my skin, at least.”

“You… cut them off? This kind of healing…”

Lilith ignored the question. “Another set of clothes gone… Oh well. Think it’s believable that my limbs were separated?”

“They will know you didn’t die. If there’s a head… but that’s impo—”

He cut off when he saw a mist of ash form in front of him. Lilith was revealed a moment later, a head in her hand. She casually placed the bleeding body part onto the pile.

“Still a bit unsettling, even after all this time,” she murmured. “I don’t suppose you want to add a few limbs to the pile?”

Donnavon touched the wall with his back, holding his breath. “No… I… I can’t… regenerate… my head,” he stammered.

“Shame,” Lilith said, adding some ash to the pile. “So, where to?”

“What’s… that… one for?” Donnavon asked, pointing at the ashen warrior standing next to her. He failed to identify the creature.

Pure ash?

“It will activate the enchantments by attacking the walls if someone tries to open the door. Or in three hours if nothing happens, just in case.”

Donnavon gulped. “You’re very open about what you can do…” he said. “I appreciate your trust.”

“Yeah, just don’t talk about it with everyone. Not that it would matter much,” she added. “So, where to?”

“There is a large store about sixty, maybe seventy meters to the west… The store rooms should be large enough to make teleportation possible.”

Even as he explained, the view in front of him shifted.

“This the one?” Lilith asked, picking up a glass jar filled with brown sludge.

Donnavon looked around for a long moment and checked a tiny window.

“Y… yes,” he stuttered.

She moved me instantly… I didn’t even feel the spell.

Space magic was incredibly rare and not well understood. Of the practitioners he had heard of, none could simply move people in the blink of an eye. Perhaps if they had more time. But even then, he should’ve been able to resist it, same as when facing void or blood magic spells attacking the body or its integrity.

“Any idea where we can find this Paladin of yours?” she asked, now wearing a different set of clothes and a hood that covered most of her face. The ash creature she had conjured hadn’t come with them.

“They were looking for a thief in the northern part of the city,” Donnavon said. “That’s all I know… Seeking him inside his quarters may be difficult. I have a suspicion that he was kept away on purpose. Perhaps he is being watched.”

“No tracking spells?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Got anything of his in your possessions… No, stupid question, you’re wearing robes.”

“He… touched my shoulder when we last spoke. A little more than an hour ago,” he said, nearly stumbling as the woman appeared next to him and inspected his shoulder.

Is she sniffing it? Donnavon could feel her presence now, the power hardly contained in such close proximity. *Are those just body enhancement spells? She’s not using any external spells.*

He felt the hairs on his neck stand up, instincts that he had forgotten about in recent decades pushing back to the surface. A monster had come to their city, and it was standing right next to him.

“Hmm… a faint aura,” she said, stepping away. “You can guide me to the northern part of the city to check it out. Maybe I can find a trace of him there.”

Donnavon nodded. “Stairs are that way,” he said and pointed.

“My perception works again, don’t worry.”

Soon after that, his view changed a few times, various damp cellars appearing and vanishing around him, and he closed his eyes to avoid getting nauseous. It was exactly how he’d imagined teleportation to be.

“You okay? You seem a little off the rails,” Lilith said.

Donnavon felt his mind clear, magic flowing into him. “Stop using your spell… is it mind magic?”

“No, just healing. We’re in the northern part of the city now. Think you can dress down a bit so that your friends in the Order won’t notice you so easily?”

“I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I don’t have a spare set of clothes with me, nor do I possess a storage item.”

Brown pants, a shirt, and a vest appeared in the woman’s hands. “Should be about your size.”

He couldn’t help but shake his head at the ridiculous situation. He had known enough adventurers in his time to know that even for them, this would be confusing. “Do you just walk around with dozens of sets of clothes in case this happens?”

“No, there’s a clothing store on the street opposite this cellar.”

“Space magic… I see. I can’t say I approve of you stealing from the local population.”

She laughed, shaking her head.

“What is there to laugh about?”

“I thought you wanted to prevent bloodshed and a war. Borrowing some clothes is hardly comparable. But if you insist.” She summoned a single gold coin, flicking it upward before it vanished. “Right into the store owner’s pouch. Now you owe me a piece of gold.”

He looked at the clothes, then he started pulling on the pants below his robes. *Hardly worth a piece of gold. The wealthy and their disregard for coin.*

Lilith sat on a nearby crate, waiting for him to dress, and jumped up when he was done. “Take this too,” she said, handing him a cloak.

“Like I’m some kind of rogue…” he murmured with a frown.

“Exciting, right?” she asked, a broad grin on her face. “Now, let’s fuck shit up. Wait, no. The opposite.”

* * *

Ilea found a trace of the Paladin a few minutes later, her and Donnavon now two totally-not-shady companions walking through the northern part of the city.

Halstein was pretty, the architecture reminding her of Salia. Tiled roofs and delicately carved shutters in different colors, heavy doors with varied designs, and windows of different sizes, forms, and ages. It felt like an old city. Not one that was as rich as Virilya, for the buildings were generally smaller and less magnificent, but not falling behind in charm and soul.

There was a tension in the streets, a sense of people rushing after opportunities or blowing off frustrations, though the alleys felt less shady than in the former Kingdom of Baralia, and the people felt a lot more hopeful.

In terms of the architecture, she felt that Halstein’s color and variety were what Ravenhall lacked. Still, the mountain city was changing quickly, with refugees and immigrants from all over the Plains bringing their own history and culture to enrich the three-walled fortress town.

She refocused on the faint sense of magic she had felt from inspecting the Cleric’s shoulder.

Now that it was no longer a simple trap or, even worse, just a boring meeting, the whole ordeal felt much more exciting, and she was taking it a lot more seriously. Not because she felt in danger, but because she

remembered the blood magic rituals in Baralia. If that Order could set up something like that, this one could too.

And if they try something like that, I'll make sure they fail, just like the Order of Truth failed in Yinnahall.

"They went down here, it seems," she said, pointing at a set of stairs leading into the sewers. The stairs were solidly constructed and well-maintained, as everything in the city was, but the smell that floated up from the dank entrance was something no amount of city planning could avoid.

"The culprit must've tried to flee," Donnavon said as he craned his neck to glance behind them. In his panic to go unnoticed, he moved far too quickly, making the gesture even more suspicious. He then took a second look shortly after.

Ilea smiled, eying the man as he turned back to her.

"What?" he asked, his brow coated with sweat.

"You know, I'm not the best at hiding, but you suck at it."

With that, she sauntered down the stairs toward the foul-smelling sewer entrance.

A few teleports later, she held up her hand and watched a scene unfold through Arcane Dominion. Voices could be heard from a few dozen meters away, dulled by the twisting tunnels in between.

Two heavily armored warriors, a man and a woman, were standing in front of an enchanted wall, one of them crouched.

"We have to get an Inquisitor down here," the man said.

"Not now. We should wait until the meeting with Lilith is concluded," the woman replied. "That's more important than finding out whatever this is. Probably just a smuggler stash."

"The male voice is Bryce," Donnavon hissed.

Ilea rolled her eyes and gave the old healer an annoyed glare. He had *not* used his inside voice.

She didn't bother to react when the male Paladin appeared in front of them with his sword drawn.

"Hey there," Ilea said with a wave.

"Identify yourself," the man demanded, his eyes wide.

The female Paladin appeared at his side a moment later, her weapon drawn as well.

"Naomi, stay back," he snapped at her, his grip tightening on his sword.

[Divine Paladin – lvl 305]
[Veteran Paladin – lvl 215]

"Peace, Bryce, it's me," Donnavon said, taking a step forward as he pulled back his hood.

Ilea kept her eyes on the woman, using Space Shift to prevent a teleport.

Just in case.

"What's the meaning of this?" Bryce demanded. "Are you being held captive?"

Donnavon gave an uneasy chuckle. "Quite the contrary. Lilith may have saved my life, and many more in turn. But only if we can figure out what's happening." Donnavon's eyes darted to the female Paladin, Naomi. "Do you trust her?"

Naomi winced, taking a small step back.

Bryce stiffened. "We've trained and fought together for decades. I trust her more than the monster by your side."

"My name is Lilith," Ilea said.

"Bryce," Donnavon said, walking a few steps closer to the man. "The High Clerics, or perhaps even the Speaker, put me in a room below the eastern temple for the talk with this woman you see before you. They tried to poison us and put enchantments in place to keep us locked in there. There were even traps that would kill us if we tried to escape."

"Ridiculous," Naomi said.

Bryce's brow furrowed. "Go on," he said, ignoring the woman by his side.

"I suspect it was a ploy to put the blame for my death on Lilith," Donnavon explained. "To kill her too, if possible, and start a conflict with Ravenhall… or perhaps just the Sentinels."

Bryce ground his teeth, processing this information, then glared at Ilea. He remained surprisingly calm. The Paladin was likely the only one here who knew she was a three-mark, yet he never faltered.

"Did you meddle with his mind? Tell the truth, creature," Bryce said to her. He didn't sound condescending, merely stating what he thought she was. Which was not human.

Creature? Now that's just rude.

"I'm not a mind mage," she said with a smile. "My Class, and the question marks. You can see them, right?"

He didn’t reply, but the squirrely look in his eyes made it obvious.

“Then you know I have little reason to fear the Inquisitors and Paladins stationed near the temple. The fact that I found common ground with the High Cleric here is the only reason there hasn’t been a massacre.” She paused, then added, “Yet.” She glanced at Donovan. “We would both appreciate it if it stayed that way.”

“What does she mean?” Naomi asked. “Is she that much stronger than you?”

Bryce lowered his sword, sheathing the weapon a moment later. “I trust you, Donnavon, you know that. I pray to Hella and Friede that I’m not wrong about this.”

Maybe this isn’t the best time, but I really want to know…

“I’ve been wondering,” Ilea said. “The gods you pray to. Are they around?”

“I’m not aware of physical manifestations,” the High Cleric answered, as if it weren’t a particularly uncommon question.

“I see,” Ilea said, a little disappointed.

“Are you a god yourself?” Bryce asked, taking off his helmet to reveal luscious blond hair.

Ilea cringed at the mention of godhood. “No. We’re trying to avoid such terminology. It makes me uncomfortable.”

Bryce actually smiled at that. “Well, that’s heartening. You seem grounded, despite your incredible strength.”

“I have good friends who keep me that way.”

Mostly. Though I guess he wouldn’t understand how it feels to face a four-mark creature’s magic. And to come out on top.

Naomi glared at Bryce, one hand still on her weapon and a deep frown on her face. Noticing his companion’s discomfort, Bryce gave Ilea a questioning look.

She shrugged.

He smiled. “Lilith is a three-mark. She’s above level five hundred – and is the strongest human I have ever seen.”

Naomi’s composure faltered, and her hand finally slipped off the hilt of her weapon.

Donnavon whispered another prayer to himself.

“Are we done with this, then? I thought you wanted to prevent a conflict?” Ilea said to the cleric.

He shook his head. “Your language could use some refinement. But yes. Bryce, I believe we have to gather our allies and speak to the royals before those responsible for this betrayal present their own version of events.”

“I…” Naomi started, face flushed and looking at the ground. “I suspected… that something might happen to you… High Cleric.” She dropped to one knee, a hand over her heart, and her head bowed. “Forgive me.”

“What do you mean?” Bryce hissed.

“I heard… conversations between high-ranking members. Your views are not… well-liked. I thought it was possible they wanted to send you to the mon… to Lilith. To be… silenced.”

“And you didn’t think to share this with me?” Bryce growled, taking a step toward her.

“We all knew what was expected of me,” Donnavon interrupted. “But we were blinded by our fear of the unknown. Now, let us not waste any more time. We need to figure out who we can trust and how we can find those who have corrupted our Order from within.”

“Fine. We’ll deal with this later.” He turned toward Ilea. “So, what’s your role in this?”

“I came here to see if we could establish relations with the Corinth Order. I didn’t expect much, but it’s shaping up to be quite interesting,” she answered with a smile. “They did technically try to kill me, so I’m happy to help with the cleanup. More importantly, though, do you know if your Order has the capability of casting large-scale blood magic rituals?”

* * *

King Emmanuel tapped his chair, looking at his advisors.

“She’s been in there for over two hours,” Julianna said. “With dozens of high-level Inquisitors and Paladins surrounding the temple. Even our spies can’t get through.”

“Nothing suspicious so far, then?” he replied.

“I don’t know what they’re planning,” the Queen answered. “The Speaker has been vague. His warnings about the Sentinels were dismissed, but I’m worried about how far they might go.”

The Queen wore her hair in a braid today, like she often had during their adventuring days.

I wish we were alone right now, without this annoying business.

“The Head Administrator wouldn’t want open conflict, nor would Ilea,” Emmanuel said. “Everything we’ve learned about them suggests that.”

“If they succeed in a brazen plan and civilians die, we won’t be able to withhold assistance,” Katarina said.

“Not without an explanation,” Julianna added.

“What do you think, Lady Veyer?” Emmanuel asked. Perhaps it had been a mistake not to intervene in the meeting.

His mother-in-law gave a small smile, her inquisitive eyes peering at him with interest.

“The current Speaker of the Corinth Order is rather young. Inexperienced. He will blunder,” she said. “He thinks himself invulnerable. Lilith has faced armies and creatures beyond our understanding. She will not be defeated by the Corinth Order.”

How strong is she really? The Paladins have a member at level three hundred. Powerful enough to challenge everyone in this very room, the King thought with a sigh. *If the Corinth Order can’t stop her, what can we do?*

He was already dreading the negotiations with Ravenhall. The first letters had been sent – mundane trade suggestions so far, but it wouldn’t remain that way forever. They had to be prepared. And they had to prevent a war at all costs. If the Shadows joined the field, their armies would be slaughtered.

Asren appeared next to him on one knee. “Your Majesty, Joel has sent an urgent request for an audience.”

“Who is it?” he asked.

“High Cleric Donnavon and Paladin Bryce of the Corinth Order – and Lilith,” the man whispered.

Lady Veyer smirked in an almost predatory manner.

“How did our spies miss them?” Julianna asked.

“My brother did warn us,” Katarina said. “She’s a space mage, among other things. There’s no reason to doubt his word anymore,” she added, gritting her teeth.

“Where are they now?” Emmanuel asked.

“They’re waiting in the Kingsguard training dome,” Asren answered.

Julianna stood up. “That area is off-limits for civilians. How did they get in there?”

“Your Majesty, it doesn’t matter,” Asren said. “I identified Lady Lilith. She showed three marks.”

Emmanuel groaned and stood up. “Of course she did.”

“Surely you don’t intend to meet her there?” Katarina asked. “I implore you, invite her here.”

“I believe the time to feign strength has passed. Let’s meet her at the place of her choosing and find out if our extensive espionage funding has paid off.”

If she really is the Ilea I’ve read about, there should be no issues at all.

“Inform the cooks to prepare a feast,” the King added as he walked out of the throne room. “Anybody who would like to join me is welcome to do so.”

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ELEVEN

Royalty

Everyone joined, of course. They were too curious not to meet the downright mythical healer who had risen to so much wealth and power in the past few years.

"Go on ahead, I will catch up with you," Cecila Veyer said, gesturing them on. She had grown rather slow and frail in her twilight years and often arrived late to gatherings.

Emmanuel didn't react. He was choosing to show weakness by going to Lilith instead of letting her come to him, but he didn't have to rush.

"We will meet her together. If she's cooperating with the Corinth Order, we'll have a better chance of responding. Asren is gathering the remaining Kingsguard as we speak."

Don't ruin this, Joel, he thought, suppressing a grin. Perhaps they were in luck. Joel may even make a good impression on an important guest for the first time in his life.

The nobles walked in lock-step, some of them veterans who had fought together. Julianna was by his side, allowing herself a quick squeeze of his hand.

A three-mark human, he thought, memories of the creatures they had slain running through his head. *What kind of beasts has she dispatched to reach that power?*

They reached a marble corridor in the outer part of the royal palace, the Kingsguard training dome just a short distance ahead.

“Fighting,” Katarina said, magic starting to circle her form.

“Stop,” the King said, raising a hand to calm her.

Just as we expected, he thought, glancing at his wife. *You’re gorgeous.*

Julianna stared back at him. He could almost hear her mentally telling him to focus for once in his life. He wanted to ask her if she remembered the abomination they had killed in the southern mountains. She had looked at him the same way back then.

Emmanuel couldn’t help but feel a bit anxious as they continued down the marble corridor, but his fears vanished when he took in the scene within the Kingsguard training dome. Joel Fiore, arguably the strongest member of the Kingsguard, was laughing in satisfaction as he fought an ash-clad warrior wielding an obsidian warhammer.

The King’s group exchanged glances with two Paladins of the Corinth Order and a High Cleric wearing civilian clothing, but nobody interrupted the duel. Instead, everyone paused to admire the impressive display of Joel’s magic. He rushed forward, a broad grin on his face, blue lightning sparking across his body as his speed built. He vanished three times and reappeared close to the ashen warrior, his charged fist plunging forward.

He’s not holding back. At all.

Lilith seemed casual in comparison, her stance barely suggesting that she was in battle, the obsidian hammer nonchalantly held in one hand. She stepped to the side, turning her horned head slightly to watch Joel. Then she swung her hammer as if it were a mere toy, its heavy handle striking Joel’s chest.

The armored man was flung backward, hit the ground, and rolled a few times before skidding to a halt. His enchanted breastplate now had a massive dent in it, as did his chest. He loosened the straps and ripped it off, spitting blood onto the thin layer of sand, then crouched low and charged his magic once more.

“Joel,” Emmanuel called, taking advantage of the natural lull in battle.

The man sighed, standing upright as his chest healed. “Bah. It was just getting interesting!”

“You were about to get yourself killed!” Julianna chided as she walked over to him. “Why can you not just sit out *one* fight?!”

Joel raised his arms in defense. “I challenged her, and she accepted.”

Lilith turned toward them now, her ashen armor receding to reveal an attractive young woman with long black hair and blue eyes. She wore a

cloak atop casual clothing, though Emmanuel didn't miss that the clothes looked like they'd come straight out of a tailor's shop.

Storage items, he thought, glancing at the necklace and bracelet, both partially hidden. She kept the hammer out. Why, he didn't know. Lilith fought with ash, her body, and mana intrusion. Not a war hammer. *Another demonstration of power. She's not even using her magic.*

"Welcome to Halstein, Lilith of Ravenhall," Emmanuel said.

[Battle Healer – lvl ???]

The woman seemed unsure what to do, glancing over at the Kingsguard she had just fought. "Joel, what's the process here? I'd like to avoid another incident."

The man jogged over, ignoring Julianna as he barked at Lillith. "Bow deep, face touching the ground. You're addressing royalty!"

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Even I can tell you're fucking with me. Now tell me what's what, or I'll beat the shit out of you again."

"Sounds good to me," the man answered, spreading his arms as lightning crackled around him.

"I believe formalities are not necessary in this case, Lilith," Emmanuel cut in. "Or should I say, Ilea?"

The woman looked over at him. "Glad to hear that. Ilea is fine, if you already know that much. I assume you're the King?"

She seems… disappointed? Well, I'm not a three-mark, after all.

"Indeed. Emmanuel Eilhart. I had hoped to invite you to visit after your meeting with the Corinth Order. But it looks like that didn't go exactly as you intended." He gestured to the Order members. "You may join us."

They looked tense, more so than the last time he had seen them. Was it just because of Lilith's presence?

"You must be the Queen, then?" Ilea asked, looking over at Lady Veyer.

The older woman wore a complicated expression, one Emmanuel couldn't recall ever seeing.

"Interesting… magic," Ilea said, her lips curling upward slightly.

"I'm the Queen," Julianna interjected, joining Emmanuel at his side. "Julianna Veyer. It seems our inquiries managed to uncover some truth after all."

“Inquiries? About me?” Ilea asked. “I didn’t think I’d be that interesting.”

“No need to be so humble. It would be wonderful to welcome you to our palace officially. Our cooks are preparing a feast as we speak.”

Lilith smiled. “I hope you have better poison than the Corinth Order.”

Katarina grumbled something under her breath.

“Maybe you should introduce yourself as well,” Emmanuel said to the others.

“Katarina Elyse. I believe you know my dearest brother,” she said, not making a secret of her dislike of the man.

“I’m familiar with him,” Lilith said, her voice flat.

Emmanuel felt his instincts scream for a moment, a cold feeling going down his back. *It seems like Katarina isn’t the only one who has an issue with Michael. He never was one for social skills.*

“Cecila Veyer, at your service,” Lady Veyer said with a warm smile.

“Nice to meet you. Are you interested in a spar, Lady Veyer?” Ilea asked.

Why single her out? Emmanuel wondered. She was an experienced and powerful mage, but there were stronger fighters here.

The woman chuckled and waved her off. “My prime is long past, young healer. I’m sure you’ll find more formidable training partners in this very dome.”

* * *

Dangerous, that one, Ilea thought, returning the smile.

[Druid Healer – lvl 240]

Lady Veyer looked unassuming, though the wrinkles on her face and her long, pale gray hair showed her age. She carried a gnarled wooden walking stick or perhaps a staff of some kind. Simple black robes covered her body, her back bent a little, with various pockets for easy access to whatever items were stored within.

Something about her bothered Ilea. Identify suggested level two forty, and Veteran told her the same. But when she looked into the woman’s small

eyes, she felt something more. A worthy foe, perhaps.

Hiding from both of my skills? Maybe she has some kind of intimidation skill… but she's acting the part of the old woman. Well, if she wants to hide it, that's her choice. Just have to be careful around her.

The King and Queen looked young, around thirty. Looks were deceiving, however. All it meant was that they had reached the two hundreds in their early thirties.

[Fire Mage – lvl 265]

Emmanuel Eilhart looked good, she wouldn't deny it. A nice jawline, short black beard, a well-styled haircut, and deep brown eyes. He seemed to be well-trained, too, an experienced warrior if the few movements she had seen suggested anything. The man wore a fancy gambeson in a deep forest green, with golden embroidery decorating the chest and arms. He wore a few golden rings on his left hand and none on his right, and a thin circular crown rested on his head. She thought his title fitting.

The Queen, on the other hand, looked glacial. She wore an armored black dress with lines of silver thread running through it, forming complex designs and runes. Ilea could see the power flowing through the metal.

Either it's enchanted, or she's a silver mage.

Her hair was blonde, a single perfect braid going down her back, and her skin was pale. The Queen's green eyes seemed downright piercing due to the contrasting colors.

[Silver Mage – lvl 248]

Guessed right, she thought.

The last woman seemed to wear a perpetual frown, her black eyes cold as they stared at her. She wore a fine silk dress as black as her hair.

Michael's sister, apparently.

[Metal Mage – lvl 242]

Seems to run in the family. I wonder if she dislikes him because he got gold, Ilea thought. *Or maybe she just made the comment before to get on my*

good side. I'm meeting nobility, after all. Hopefully this will be as short as possible. At least they're preparing a feast. Maybe I should hire a few bards to sing songs about my food and drink preferences.

Her eyes turned to Joel, the level two eighty lightning mage. So far, he was her favorite person in Halstein by a long shot.

Direct, brawler, well-trained, handsome in a rugged kind of way, knows what he wants.

I guess I should've known this from my experiences with the Shadows and the Lily, but it does feel kind of weird to talk to a Queen and King and to know they're only around half my level. Hmm, I wonder how Alyris and her entourage measure up to me now.

It seems like most humans don't care to push far past the two or three hundreds. I guess the risk is too high and they don't have healing. Not to mention the number of high-level creatures one has to find and kill to advance this far.

Thanks, Meadow.

"We heard about your arrival and subsequent meeting with the Corinth Order," the King said. "Your companions' tense expressions suggest something unexpected may have transpired. You mentioned poison?"

"I'm an outsider," Ilea said. "It seems someone may have wanted to use me in their scheme. I think it's best if the Head Paladin and High Cleric explain our presence here."

Delegate responsibility, she thought with a smile, stepping aside as the three Corinth members bowed deeply.

"High Cleric Donnavon, Paladin Bryce… and you are?" Emmanuel asked.

"Paladin Naomi, Your Majesty."

Ilea only half-listened to the subsequent conversation, just to make sure they weren't spinning a new tale, as she twirled her hammer, winking at Joel. He joined her a moment later, garnering a glare from the Queen.

"Sure you don't want to start a brawl?" Joel asked. "They've been sitting around steeped in their politics for decades. Barely remember the last time his bloody suit got any dirt on it."

"You know the King well?" Ilea asked.

"We were adventurers at one point. Well, nobility too, but it's good to get real experience. Lets you appreciate all the fancy crap you grow up

with. Being in the Kingsguard isn't half bad, don't get me wrong. I just wish there were a few more monster attacks."

"You could take a vacation. I know a really nice spot – a few islands in the west," Ilea said with a smile.

"If only," he sighed. "I can't be gone for more than a few days at a time."

If only there were some kind of teleportation magic available to solve this issue.

The conversation was growing more tense as Donnavon shared apparently sensitive information with the royals, naming loyal followers of the Corinth doctrine. A bunch of armored warriors and mages had arrived in the meantime, though they remained a respectful distance away from the group, most of them looking at either Bryce or her.

She spotted the rogue who had been training with Joel when they had arrived. He looked away when he noticed her gaze. "He looks a bit like you."

"Asren is my brother. What do you think?" Joel said.

"Handsome lad. Seems very reserved. Devoted to his duty?"

"I'll take the compliment," Joel said. "But don't get me wrong, Ilea. We'll both fight you if you try anything."

I could kill everyone in this room. Except maybe that Druid. But who knows? She seemed uncertain too.

"I'm not here to start a war, Joel. I very much dislike participating in them."

"I expected a less serious reply." He smiled at her again. "Care for a tour of the city later? I know a few wonderful spots."

His grin was contagious, and she grinned back. "Intriguing. Perhaps I'll take you up on that offer, brave Kingsguard."

The Queen walked over a moment later, a tense expression on her face, but then she smiled. "Do you prefer Lilith or Ilea?"

"Doesn't matter to me."

"Lilith, then. I'm aware that you came to meet with the Corinth Order as a representative of the Medic Sentinel Corps, but perhaps you would be interested in talking about potential agreements with this Kingdom as a representative of the Ravenhall council?"

You know about that too, hmm?

“I’m not in a position to make such arrangements, I’m afraid. I suggest you contact the Head Administrator.”

“Ah, yes. Claire, was it? We’ve already been in touch. Meeting in person, however, is my preferred method to talk about such matters. It’s easier with a few bottles of wine and good food.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’m sure you’ll find an arrangement that works in due time.”

Now stop bothering me about trade deals.

“She doesn’t seem to speak your language, Julianna,” Joel said.

The Queen glared at him for a split second before she smiled again. “I’m sure we will, Lilith. I hope you join the feast regardless, and I apologize for the poor hospitality shown by our compatriots.”

“I’d be happy to join,” Ilea said with a smile.

Joel breathed out when the Queen returned to the others.

An attempt on my life equals poor hospitality? Fancy that. Diplomacy at work.

“We can leave now if you want to,” Joel said. “You may as well have told her to fuck off.”

“I’m somewhat invested in this whole Corinth business. Poor hospitality *is* somewhat offensive, after all.”

The man huffed. “Understandable.”

“Before we move on, are you sure there isn’t any danger of a blood ritual like we saw in Baralia? If the Order is pushed into a corner…”

“We have safeguards in place. I can’t share any more than that with you, I’m afraid.”

“Good. Just don’t blame me if everything blows up.”

“Someone will find a way to blame it on you, I’m afraid. But I’m serious. We work with some expert blood mages.”

I know. One thing I’d never say about Michael is that he’s not an expert in his field.

On with the feast, then.

* * *

Emmanuel watched the growing mountain of food in front of Lilith, a thin limb of ash darting around the table, adding more and more to her plate as

she ate with abandon. He allowed himself a glance at Julianna, whose smile wavered slightly when she noticed his look.

Worried? Or is that envy? I'm interested to hear what you'll have to share, love.

He was pretty sure the best approach to Lilith was acting natural around her, but he couldn't allow himself to do so too much. Joel had a certain reputation, and this time it was very much in their favor to have him meet an important guest first. Still, it wouldn't make for a very regal sight if they behaved like adventurers. Lilith wasn't the only person in the hall, after all.

I hope the guard can prove their claims.

Several teams were already investigating, Bryce and Donnavon suggesting targets and potential allies for their Order's sake. Removing corrupting elements was always beneficial, and cooperating with the side that would come out on top would strengthen their loyalty to the crown. Favors for favors. Luckily, the balance rarely tipped overwhelmingly toward one side as it had today.

A plot to start a conflict with Ravenhall.

The news of the city's independence had been surprising but certainly welcome as soon as it was apparent that their leadership wasn't simply an uncoordinated rebellious group like the one in Dawntree.

Lys had also accepted Ravenhall's independence and lost much of its influence in the southern Plains. A surprising choice, though their war efforts must have weighed on their military more than he had expected.

Of course, the territory Lys had gained in Baralia more than made up for what they gave up, but with their geographic location, Kroll might be able to apply more pressure on the Empire in the coming decades. That was if Alyris didn't plan to reintegrate Ravenhall in due time.

"I heard of your exploits in the south," Emmanuel said, looking at Ilea.

She glanced at him, cleaning her mouth with a napkin.

"There is a rumor going around that you found and freed Queen Lumian," he continued.

You didn't stop at the Abominations as we did.

He remembered the Specters protecting the lower parts of the dungeon. Creatures that their whole team couldn't face. It had been deemed too dangerous even for training.

If one had followed us… We wouldn't be sitting here.

"You heard about that?" Ilea asked.

“You’re hailed as a hero in some parts of the southern regions, though I hear the people only dare whisper your name.”

She gave him a questioning look, drinking from her ale.

“They say you terrorized a group of adventurers and that you abducted a young girl as payment,” Emmanuel continued, raising an eyebrow. A few people at the table tensed up at his words.

He knew she wouldn’t be bothered by any of that, and he knew none of it was true. Well, she may have scared the locals, but that had even happened to him, despite his own comparably modest power. He couldn’t imagine what low-level humans thought of Ilea when they saw her use her magic.

How I wish to see it too. Ah, the downsides of kingly manners. Perhaps we should organize a tournament.

“Terrorize is a bit extreme,” Ilea said. “As for the girl, it was her choice.”

He smiled, enjoying the looks on the faces of the nobles sitting at the long table almost as much as she surely did.

“Where is she now?” he asked, moving the conversation on to avoid pointless discussions with people who lacked the ability to detect sarcasm. Something he’d had to learn the hard way.

“She’s training to become a Sentinel,” Ilea said, luckily not pushing the joke any further.

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TWELVE

A Monster's Feast

"I'm proud to hear a citizen of Kroll has managed to join your prestigious organization," Emmanuel said.

Apparently, the Sentinels were very particular about being an 'organization' rather than an 'Order'. He thought it understandable, considering the terms' respective reputations and intents.

"I'm sure she will do well," Ilea said with a smile, resuming her extensive lunch.

A while later, without preamble, Katarina said, "I'm curious as to your relationship with my brother."

Emmanuel was interested too. There was very little information about it, but there had supposedly been a small incident at a ball celebrating the end of the war in Yinnahall. In a way, that suggested familiarity.

Michael Elyse provided Kroll's military and other sectors with important research and resources. Many of his projects demanded a certain level of discretion. The chance of outside actors becoming interested in his work had always been a possibility, as was an attack by certain parties, some of whom were sitting at this very table.

A loose relationship between the crown and the Elyse noble was what his father had deemed the best approach, and Emmanuel had continued in the same manner. Michael was no threat to Kroll – as long as he could be judged to be the sole perpetrator of his activities. His sister obviously didn't like it, but she never openly opposed or obstructed the arrangement either.

Criminals to be executed could be used for more than just fertilizer, after all, so they were sent to further Michael's more 'unorthodox' research instead. Emmanuel suspected that Michael had gone beyond the legal or even ethical limits in his experiments. However, a large-scale investigation into his activities would only result in more bloodshed. Lady Veyer had suggested rituals, as seen in Baralia, were the least of his capabilities.

Ruling among monsters who simply have no interest in such matters, he thought, looking at Lilith. *Is she part of their little Order as well, I wonder? They must've set their eyes on her long before we even realized how powerful she was.*

"We worked together in the Baralia war," Ilea said, the look in her eyes making it clear that this was to be the extent of her elaboration. Katarina evidently understood, leaning back in her chair.

It will be interesting to know what she learns once she gets her alone. And if she chooses to share it with us.

"I heard you have traveled to the chaotic northern regions," one of the other nobles said.

Emmanuel was under no illusions. He smiled lightly, looking at the twenty or so people sitting at the long table. All respected nobles or high-ranking members of various institutions important to Kroll. Some, he was sure, had other important business to attend to but had chosen to come to Halstein as soon as the news of Lilith's arrival reached their ears.

Hawks, the lot of them, Emmanuel thought, suppressing a broader grin when he looked at Ilea. Most of these people had grown up with incredible wealth. They'd had guards from the age of three, protecting them from the common folk roaming the streets of whatever place they ruled. No matter how much education these people had received, they couldn't possibly understand the stranger sitting among them.

An unknown. Most certainly low-born, or perhaps an exiled bastard left behind with secrets and elixirs to allow for faster growth. Involved in various expeditions as an adventurer, Taleen dungeons no less. Joined the Shadow's Hand after an incredibly fast climb to level two hundred, and she hasn't stopped. A few years and suspiciously timely investments pushed her into leagues comparable to the crown of Kroll, if not beyond.

What these people don't understand, though, is that she's an adventurer at heart. She has no interest in political games; her body language alone suggests as much. Either that or she's the most capable manipulator I've

ever seen. A rather low probability. Too many blunders just in the last three hours.

"I did go north," Ilea answered. "Arcane storms rage during daytime, and magical mists descend at night."

Emmanuel had read the reports. Kroll had invested in expeditions to the north during the last few centuries, but the territory was deemed too dangerous for settlement and too treacherous for exploration. A country's gold could be spent more wisely.

Single high-level adventurers, however, could surely benefit greatly. Perhaps her wealth came from the treasures found within a northern dungeon. He wondered what she had seen in her travels, what kind of creatures she had met and fought.

"Did you find any signs of civilization?" Emmanuel dared ask. He was genuinely interested; it just so happened to be information that could justify investing funds in future exploration.

"Yes," Ilea said quickly, eating a few bites before she downed her sixth mug of ale. "Ancient ruins of different civilizations, much like the ones that can be found in the Plains."

She's being vague, he thought, but he didn't press her. "Would you be interested in future collaborations to map the north?"

Ilea looked at him. "Not personally, no. I'm sure there'd be Sentinels or Shadows interested in that, though."

"Grand! I'll make sure it's mentioned in the letters," Emmanuel said. He ignored the glances he got for his informal behavior.

As expected. No hostility toward us.

Asren appeared next to him, whispering in his ear. "Your Majesty, we received word that the Corinth Order has been attacked by Lilith. One of their High Clerics has been confirmed dead."

Ilea grinned, then resumed her meal.

Excellent hearing. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if she could read minds.

Can you? Ilea?

She didn't react.

"Three representatives are waiting in the throne room, ready to present their case," Asren added.

"Let them join the feast. I'm sure Donnavon will be glad to have three people convicted so early," Emmanuel said.

As am I. A Healing Order failing to properly confirm the death of a victim. How quaint.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty,” one noble spoke up, an older gentleman below level two hundred, “how can you be sure that this woman is who she claims to be? If Ravenhall has indeed dared to strike against our kingdom, we should not be sitting here feasting.”

Today is getting better and better.

At least the man hadn’t shared any information about this feast with the Order, though the more likely possibility was that he simply hadn’t been able to in the short time he’d had. He may have publicly questioned Lilith, but he didn’t dare side with the Order.

“I confirmed her identity myself. As have my advisors,” Emmanuel stated before looking at Ilea. “Do you have a way to disguise yourself?”

The look she gave him didn’t seem to suggest she did.

“Would you allow an illusion, in that case? It will simply hide you behind a layer of magic. You will still be able to see beyond it.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Ilea answered. “I’m always interested in seeing new spells.”

A scholar? Or merely for resistance training?

The reports about her hadn’t surprised him terribly. Adventurers often subjected themselves to various levels of danger and magic. With enough potions or healers close by, the training was mostly safe, and any resistances would help immensely in future battles.

Even so, the kind of training Lilith underwent suggested some level of madness. Either that or she possessed the second tier of Pain Tolerance in order to withstand such torture. Was it merely for the benefit of her power? She didn’t seem broken.

A way to heal the mind, perhaps. Or she truly isn’t human.

Standing next to the woman’s chair, Asren cast his spell, covering both of them in a shadow that vanished a moment later, leaving behind the illusion of an empty chair.

“Shadow magic?” Ilea asked.

Emmanuel gestured for Asren to talk freely. The man took his job very seriously, despite their past. The King appreciated it.

“Yes,” Asren answered.

“I’d love to get the resistance. Must’ve missed it along the way.”

A few of the nobles murmured among themselves.

Subjecting oneself to pain. Not something people who haven't faced a monster in decades consider. At least, not one that wasn't chained up.

He wondered if a conflict wouldn't benefit Kroll in the long run. The constant tensions between Lys and its northern neighbors forged the generals and soldiers of their armies. Then he dismissed the thought. Prosperity and peace were valuable assets in their own right. Ones that required protection. Emmanuel had long known that his court would provide little actual might in a direct conflict.

There were other ways to overcome challenges, though.

"It would be an honor to train with one such as you," Asren said.

A few people gasped at the exclamation. Even Emmanuel found himself a little conflicted. As an adventurer himself, he understood the notion. But to admit to it, as a member of the Kingsguard, amongst the nobles of the country?

He glanced in the direction of the man. *A risky play, Asren. Even for you. Who knows if it will pay off?*

The gates opened, revealing two guards escorting a trio of Corinth Healers. Two of them were wearing the armor of the Inquisitors, while the last and most important member was High Cleric Mateo.

Emmanuel had met the man a few times before. He was built like a Paladin. A few scars showed on his face, likely from his childhood. Before he'd benefited from the Order's healing.

[Veteran Paladin – lvl 228]

The Inquisitors were both above level two hundred. Perhaps meant as a show of force.

Battle Healer and Paladins, are they not awfully similar? I wonder what constitutes the difference?

"Mateo. Long has it been. Please, share your accusations. I hear the matter is quite pressing," Emmanuel said, his voice sincere as he leaned forward a little, gesturing for the man to speak.

"Indeed. As you may know, the monster Lilith, who claims to be the head of a Healing Order in Ravenhall, answered our invitation to discuss potential cooperation." He paused for a moment, gritting his teeth. "She attacked and killed High Cleric Donnavon in a savage strike."

Emmanuel could see the veins pop on his skull. The man of faith wasn't blessed with extensive hair growth. *His reaction seems genuine.*

He glanced at the Queen, who gave him a slight nod.

"Did she escape?" Emmanuel asked.

"No," the man answered, sighing deeply as tears came to his eyes. "The battle was fierce but decisive. We recovered her remains and will burn them at a later time. This strike isn't why I'm here… It seems Lilith wasn't acting alone in her schemes."

"Go on."

"An adventuring team that arrived just about a quarter hour ago has informed us of demon sightings southwest of Halstein."

"Impossible," one of the nobles said. "There hasn't been a demon sighting in nearly a year. The threat has been dealt with."

"Our Inquisitors and Paladins are preparing for battle as we speak," Mateo said.

"How many?" Emmanuel asked. He didn't look at Ilea.

Convenient. If she had attacked, the demonic threat would immediately be linked to the Shadow's Hand. Some of the nobility here still seem to agree, despite her presence. To think they would go as far as summoning demons… At least they had the decency not to do so within our walls. Either that, or the work we put into protecting the city against such magic really did pay off.

"Several thousand, Your Majesty," the High Cleric answered.

"Are you suggesting Ravenhall has declared war on our country?" Emmanuel asked.

Silence spread through the room.

"Lilith's presence and the reckless murder she committed confirm our suspicions about her nature. The Shadow's Hand has proven its ability to summon these creatures." Mateo paused. "However, no Shadows have been seen amongst the creatures. Whatever threat we're facing, I suggest that we prepare for war."

"How long until these monsters reach our city?"

"Less than two hours, Your Majesty," Mateo said.

They can clean up the mess they've made. There's no reason to sacrifice any of our soldiers for this ploy.

Nevertheless, a sliver of doubt remained within his core. It was a convoluted plan, with Healing Orders conspiring to overthrow governments

and Clerics willing to commit treason to support the ‘will’ of their gods. He could see several ways everything connected, but one piece failed to make sense. That was the woman sitting to his left, concealed by shadow magic and still silently eating. To the annoyance of Asren, he realized.

Lilith was undoubtedly a three-mark creature. Likely human, and likely capable of killing everyone in this room – perhaps even in the entire city in less than an hour. He’d seen monsters of that level fight. But a human with a keen mind and the variety of two Classes, perhaps even more, was something entirely different. She had already proven herself capable of facing an entire army, and that was years ago.

“Have you seen the body?” Emmanuel asked.

Mateo nodded. “Burned flesh and bone. Her ashes have been spread throughout the halls of our holy site. The Inquisitors who were part of the battle managed to take her head. I saw her skull.”

More people to add to the list. I doubt they would fail at such a simple task. Which means there’s a skull that convinced them. Which could mean that Ilea can survive being beheaded. If that’s the case, how would you even kill a monster like that? Her heart? Destroy her body entirely?

“It’s quite the tale you bring to us today, High Cleric,” Emmanuel said. “One that may push us toward war with the independent city of Ravenhall and its Shadows. You know what that would mean.”

He watched the man closely, as did everyone else.

Mateo nodded solemnly, a deep frown on his face. “I, too, wish to avoid such a conflict. But our Order can’t take such a direct attack without retaliation. I simply won’t accept it. Should I be the only one who feels this way, I will charge at the enemy alone.”

“I commend your bravery. And I believe you are sincere. However, there are a few flaws in your story.”

“Please enlighten me, Your Majesty,” the High Cleric said, obviously annoyed with the apparent politics at play.

Emmanuel had shifted his attention to the two Inquisitors next to the man. Their faces were covered by helmets, but their body language, breathing, and heartbeats would likely offer enough.

“You see, earlier today, my advisors and I entertained a few rather incensed guests. Most of whom you should be familiar with,” Emmanuel said. “High Cleric Donnavon is very much alive. He came here with Paladin Bryce and Paladin Naomi to inform us of a rather devious plot.”

Mateo flinched as if struck. “Impossible… He was… killed,” he said, looking at the Inquisitor to his right.

The woman didn’t visibly react, but her heartbeat increased, and her body tensed as she shifted slightly. The other Inquisitor had a similar reaction, though more imperceptibly.

“Inquisitors,” the King started. “If you value your lives at all, I suggest you lay down your weapons and submit to the guard. If you resist, you will be executed for treason.”

The woman hesitated.

The man vanished.

“Asren,” Emmanuel said, and he watched the shadow mage vanish in pursuit.

Two guards followed Asren, just to be sure, while two more approached the woman who had raised her arms in surrender.

“Please, I had orders,” she said, turning to face away as magical cuffs were clamped around her ankles and wrists.

“Orders… from whom?” Mateo asked, a greatsword in his hand now, his face flushed with confusion and anger.

What do you intend to do with that?

The High Cleric glanced around and saw the now-occupied seat to the King’s left, blanching as he saw a casually dressed woman eating to her heart’s content. Asren’s magic had vanished with him.

She’s still eating? Perhaps she’s not human after all.

“Indeed. It was Lilith who saved the life of your fellow High Cleric,” Emmanuel said.

Ilea drank from her mug before she waved. “Hello.”

Hello?

How many of these situations have you been in?

“But that’s… impossible… The Inquisitors… why would they… Lilith… I saw your bones,” Mateo stammered, his greatsword starting to glow lightly. “Demon!”

Ilea remained calm, piling another few items onto her plate. “You’re a pretty shit healer if you think most of a body is proof of death. Also, I’m not a demon. Think about what you do next. You’re in the presence of your king.”

Emmanuel glanced at her before his eyes met Mateo’s. *Is she just being respectful? Or did she just delegate this problem to me?*

His adventuring background suggested the latter.

“What’s going on?” Mateo asked.

“Donnavon and our spies are trying to figure that out,” the King said. “In the meantime, I suggest you join their efforts. And prepare for the demon attack. I will hold the Corinth Order accountable for any damage these creatures inflict on our lands and its people.”

“I can take care of it,” Ilea said.

Emmanuel looked at her, intrigued.

She swallowed a mouthful of pie, then continued. “I get that some of you think Ravenhall sent them. So perhaps my taking care of that problem will ease your minds. A small gesture ahead of our future cooperation,” she said, glancing at the King and then at Mateo.

“There are thousands. How could you possibly face them alone? Level two hundred monsters. You were there in Ravenhall when the Shadows retook their city, were you not?” Mateo asked, still doubtful and certainly angry. It just seemed he didn’t know where to direct his anger.

“Then come and watch,” Ilea said. “You and your warriors of Hella.” There was no mockery in her voice, but the challenge was obvious.

Mateo remained quiet, a testament to his experience. Ilea’s unidentifiable level certainly helped, but those with combat experience present exchanged glances.

There had been no hesitation, no change in her breathing or heartbeat, no fear. She was either mad or believed a few thousand demons to be nothing even worth mentioning. Rats breeding in a cellar. Vermin to be exterminated.

Because to her, they are.

Emmanuel felt goosebumps on his arms.

He decided he would go and watch.

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THIRTEEN

Demon

“Everyone is here, High Cleric,” Bryce said. “Those who answered the call.”

Donnavon looked at the armor-clad members of the Corinth Order. Paladins and Inquisitors ready for battle. Healers for the rear line, ready to put their lives on the line to protect their brothers and sisters.

Mateo touched his shoulder, fury in his eyes. And guilt.

“You didn’t know,” Donnavon whispered, trying to reassure the man.

High Cleric Peterson was still nowhere to be found. High Cleric Wyssa had been arrested, her devotion to Speaker Nathanael unquestionable despite the evidence and words of her fellow Corinth healers.

Many of their Order still seemed doubtful; those surely involved had tried to flee once word had spread. Many of the warriors near the eastern temple had simply been warned of a coming battle, to remain vigilant, should Lilith show any hostility. If their word could be trusted, that was. The coming months would be difficult.

Emilia had been questioned but provided evidence of her lack of involvement. Donnavon wondered if, perhaps, she had known and just chosen to remain silent.

His heart ached at the betrayal, his trust broken as he looked into the eyes of warriors of Hella. Righteousness, devotion, sacrifice. Values he had once believed they all shared, but today proved their Order was more corrupted than he had ever thought possible.

It would take years to evaluate everyone, to collect all the evidence they could, to ensure nothing like this ever happened again. The remaining high-ranking members of all factions within their Order had voted to rescind the rank of Speaker. It was a start.

The Inquisitors would be next, Donnavon knew. He would take time to grieve and to pray. The High Cleric standing next to him didn't seem to feel the same, nor did the Head Paladin riding on his white steed with his sword drawn and wings extended. They were furious. And he knew it was just.

"Brothers and sisters!" Bryce began. "In these times, we are being tested like never before. Our home in Dawntree was taken, our members left for dead, murdered by those they had healed for decades. Halstein should have been a new beginning, but the roots of corruption have already gripped the heart of our holy cause. Nathanael has betrayed what we stand for. Those who chose to stay by his side have forfeited their lives. I stand here before you not as the Head Paladin of our Order, but as a mere follower of our gods, Friede and Hella.

"I ask you to search your hearts, brothers and sisters, to rip out any doubts and malice you may harbor. We have suffered at the hands of humans and beasts, but we cannot allow ourselves to become savages in turn. What happened today is a disgrace – one that we must remember, one for which we must repent."

He paused and rode past the ranks.

"Remember what we are. Remember what we stand for and grip it with all that you are. The demons brought upon us by those we thought our own are coming to this city. The city we swore to protect. Let us remember who we are and repent through battle. Let us destroy the evil we brought upon this world!"

He raised his sword, a bright shimmering glow added to the reflected sunlight.

"For our gods, for our fallen brothers and sisters, for the honor of the Corinth Order!"

Voices echoed the refrain, and weapons were drawn.

Onlookers had gathered near the gate. City guards, adventurers, and civilians.

The speech wasn't only for the Corinth Order, but for everyone who listened. A politician might have called it a calculated decision, but

Donnavon knew that every word from Bryce had been sincere. He, too, felt the shame and anger. He, too, wished to repent.

Donnavon swung himself onto his horse, looking at the gathered warriors and healers. The might of the Corinth Order had been reduced to a mere expedition force, and yet he felt hopeful. Hopeful for a future on the right path.

They rode southward to the rocky fields of Garahill. To face the demon horde their own had brought upon them.

I just wonder why you did it, Nathanael. So much anger, and malice, and betrayal.

Donnavon looked up when he heard a horn to the west, where a hundred riders joined their flank, royal banners flapping in the wind. The heavy cavalry had arrived. He moved to join them, along with Mateo and Bryce.

"What's the meaning of this?" the Paladin asked.

Emmanuel Eilhart smiled, his polished armor reflecting the sunlight.

A king joining the field. I pray he doesn't overextend himself.

He knew the King had ample magical power, but he doubted his experience. Though Donnavon admitted that he hadn't seen battle himself in many years, let alone against monstrous demons.

"The army shouldn't risk themselves against these creatures. They are our burden to bear," Bryce added.

Donnavon smiled when he saw the Queen.

"We will take the rear and protect your healers, should your line be broken," the King said. "I'm doubtful that will happen, however."

"Where is Lilith?" Mateo asked. "Did she not offer to come?"

"She is still… occupied with… the feast," the King said. "Though she should join us momentarily."

"It matters not," Bryce said.

"Scout report, Head Paladin," one of the Paladins said. "Around three thousand demons are currently crossing the Garahill fields. The villages have been warned. The sound of horns seems to be drawing the demons toward us. They haven't spread out yet. Most are likely close to level two hundred."

"A recent summoning, then. Good work. We ride for battle," Bryce said, a horn next to him resounding as the formation picked up speed.

"You know of Nathanael's location?" the Queen asked.

“Those imprisoned spoke of Fort Kalwart. I will lead a group to ride south after the demons are dealt with. To apprehend him.”

“What if he resists?”

Bryce looked up. “We are prepared to do what must be done.”

“I understand, and I pray for your sincerity, noble warrior.”

Bryce seemed to straighten slightly and gave her a bow.

They rode for half an hour, pushing forward until they reached the hills overlooking the fields of Garahill.

The Paladins checked their swords and bows one last time, while groups of mages began preparing spells. Healers readied their equipment and took up their positions, surrounded by heavily armored knights and trained combat mages.

The demon horde moved in the distance like a wave of flesh and terror, their screeching calls reaching them even here. There were large and lumbering monstrosities that could crush entire horses in their jaws, surrounded by thousands of two-legged monsters with blade-like arms or growths of spikes on their backs. They ran with fervor, as if pushed by hunger and madness.

“Now we know what Virilya saw when the demons descended upon them,” the King said, joining the Clerics with the Queen in tow. A few nobles had joined them, mostly those holding senior ranks within Kroll’s army.

“Monstrous creatures indeed,” Mateo said. “They move quickly.”

“They are deadlier than their level suggests,” the Queen said. “Those they kill will rise as demons themselves. We’ll have to thin their ranks before they reach your lines.”

“The demons will reach us in a few minutes. Prepare for battle,” a nearby Inquisitor said.

Many of the healers said prayers, while spells flared to life up in the front lines. The slope of the hill allowed them to see everything below.

“She didn’t come,” Mateo said, looking over his shoulder. “I had thought her sincere.”

“She seemed almost bored with our affairs,” Donnavon said. “Even when she learned that her life had been in danger.”

He didn’t miss the smile on the King’s face.

“A small token. That’s what she said,” Emmanuel said.

Even as he spoke, a whistling sound came from the north, causing many of the fighters to look up. Donnavon shaded his eyes against the sun to see a dark-winged figure flying toward them. The sound grew louder as the being passed overhead, slowing down as it descended to about a hundred meters.

Donnavon recognized the form now. “Is that her?”

They looked on as she spread her arms, dozens of dark spears forming in the sky. Glowing lines of fire covered her heavy armor now, and the spears moved in close as they too took on the embers. Lilith flew closer still, her wings moving slowly as she descended ahead of their defensive lines.

A horn blast echoed across the fields, the signal to charge.

And so it starts, Donnavon thought, watching the foremost Paladins prepare to charge, the savage demon horde advancing on them with open maws, dead eyes, and bloodied claws.

A high-pitched whistle interrupted the charge, and almost everyone froze in place as powerful magic reverberated over the hills.

‘ding’ You have heard the call of Lilith. Do not be afraid – You are paralyzed for 5 seconds

Donnavon had experienced it before. He knew she had this power. And yet he couldn’t believe his eyes. Not only did their own remain where they stood, but the demon horde also halted, creatures of claw and fang falling over each other with their remaining momentum.

Everything had stopped, except for the slowly moving wings of Lilith.

Donnavon felt his heartbeat quicken, a primal anticipation building for blood and battle. He watched as the serene quiet was interrupted by whistling spears of burning ash raining down from the heavens. He blinked as bright light flashed where the projectiles struck the ground, flames exploding outward in a rain of fury. He felt the ground shake, and a loud whistling sounded in his ears as he was deafened by the impacts.

He watched in awed fascination as dozens of demons were disintegrated, with those closest to the blasts incinerated instantly. The creatures farther away were ripped apart, limbs and entrails slapping into each other in the air, only to be burned by the next impact. It was as if a blade of fire had sliced through their charge. Hundreds were gone when

they started to move once more, only for another volley of spears to rip through the coming tide.

Donnavon took a deep breath, which caught in his throat as he watched Lilith land ahead of the front line. The grass around her caught fire, and horses shied away despite the distance. His hearing returned, healing flowing through him.

Then she shot forward with incredible speed, right into the center of the charging monsters, into the smoke and blood and falling limbs. He could see the shape of dark limbs extending from her back as she entered the chaos. A roar made him tense, but this time he didn't lock up. Demons screeched, projectiles flying out of the burning battlefield.

"Head Paladin, what are your orders?" one of the warriors asked.

A bright light flared from somewhere within the smoke, and Donnavon could feel the heat even at this distance. The horses near the front were panicking, backing up into the line behind them, while those on the flanks were trying to run away.

"We wait for the smoke to clear," Bryce said.

Nobody moved as they waited.

Before the smoke even started to clear, they could see the silhouette of Lilith flying back out, her ashen armor now covered in blood. More than a dozen ashen limbs behind her slowly dissipated as she advanced toward them, taking in the gathered army. She seemed amused as a few of the troops shrank away a step or two.

"I think I got all of them."

Donnavon glanced over to see a slight smile on the King's face before he schooled his expression. He didn't miss the Queen's icy look either, though he wasn't sure for whom it was meant.

Their army was silent, all eyes on the monster now walking toward them. Horses and Paladins stepped aside, letting her pass.

"All yours, Paladin," Ilea said as she passed Bryce.

The man stayed silent, taking a look at her before he turned his head to the battlefield.

Smoke still rose into the air, and embers lingered in the earth. There were deep craters and furrows where her magic had struck the ground, amid which lay the blackened remains of thousands of demons.

This is the slaughter she meant back in the temple, Donnavon thought, a wry smile on his face.

He gulped, thinking about what could've happened today, had he said something different, had he acted in another way. Or if she were a different woman.

Thanks be to Friede that I made a good impression.

* * *

Looking at the terrified faces of the Corinth Order members and Kroll soldiers, Ilea smiled. *That went pretty well.*

"You heard her," Bryce said, moving toward the corpses. "Kill any that live, burn what remains."

There were no survivors. Ilea had made sure of that. It had been a nice speech, returning some of the honor they had lost. But she wouldn't make it quite that easy for them. They had tried to kill her, after all.

"Enjoy the show?" she asked when she reached the King.

"The smoke limited my view, though I suppose it may have even enhanced the performance," Emmanuel said. "The grand tales of your battle in Riverwatch don't seem quite as grand anymore. Was it just as one-sided?"

Ilea didn't reply. What she had done in Riverwatch had felt necessary. If the reputation she'd gained from that helped her friends and allies, then that was fine, but neither that nor today felt particularly noteworthy to her in terms of impressiveness.

Now, what she'd done in Erendar, or on the Krahen Isles? That was a lot more impressive. But very few people had been there to see.

"Now that I've lured you all out here," she said, turning her head toward the king, prompting Asren to appear in front of him, "we can do some shadow magic training."

She smiled, sensing the tension in the people around her.

"You risk much. A joke like that would cost someone else their head," Emmanuel said, obviously the only one amused by the whole situation.

Ilea tilted her head. "Good thing I'm not someone else, then. How about it, Asren?"

The man glanced at his king, who nodded.

"What's the plan from here?" she asked, looking at Donnavon.

The Cleric smiled. "Speaker Nathanael seems to have retreated to Fort Kalwart, located in Kroll's southern mountains. The Head Paladin will lead

the charge himself, accompanied by a team of high-level warriors from the Corinth Order."

"I see. Guess I'll be joining them, then."

Ilea noted the High Clerics' conflicted looks but didn't much care. She wanted to find out why the man had tried to have her killed, and just because she thought both Bryce and Donnavon were alright didn't mean she trusted the Order as a whole. Who knew what would happen at Fort Kalwart?

"I won't keep him long," she added, then blinked a short distance away, Asren appearing close by a moment later.

"Impressive display," he said. "Charged heat, right?"

"How did you know?"

"I have faced many fire mages and creatures of the element before."

"Hmm."

She teleported a few times to put some distance between themselves and the gathered troops, followed by Asren.

"I assume I shouldn't hold back."

"No," Ilea answered, her armor receding to show her head. She kept it active for now, though, just in case. "Aim for the eyes. They're a little more vulnerable."

"To share your weaknesses so easily…" Asren said, the area dimming visibly as his magic spread. "What you showed today… It was only a fraction of your true power, wasn't it?"

She supposed that, in terms of offensive potential, she had shown as much as she could do at the moment. The charged spears were fun. Very flashy compared to her usual mana intrusion, and for a display like that, flashy was more impressive. What really made her dangerous, however, was that she could go on for a long time – and that she was very, very hard to stop or kill.

"You're an experienced warrior," Ilea said. "I'm sure you have an idea of my capabilities."

"Honestly? I don't." He smiled. "It's exciting, in a way. It will be interesting to see how your endeavors impact the balance of power."

"I think my goals are more healers and more opportunities for everyone."

"And fewer of your enemies alive," Asren said, spreading his shadow until it seemed to fix her in place, constricting around her armor until she

felt pressure on her head.

“You don’t have to hold back,” she said.

The man chuckled. “If you were a politician, I’d commend your deep-cutting insults. This spell has crushed opponents close to my own level.”

[Shadow Mage – lvl 262]

“But I’m facing a three-mark creature,” he murmured. “I shouldn’t have expected anything different.”

Ilea dismissed her mantle of ash and immediately felt his spell’s effects increase massively. Blood started trailing from her nose and ears, and the pressure nearly managed to pop her eyes.

“Movement restriction, too,” she noted, slowly moving her shaking arm up to her face.

“Spells like this are massively undervalued.”

“Maybe you should tell people about it,” Ilea said, her voice subdued as her jaw fought against the pressure.

“Those who realize usually die a few moments later. I’m sure it will be valuable information to your allies.”

Not exactly a revelation. Though I haven’t had anything similar used against me many times before. The Ascended and Hector, I guess, but those weren’t exactly everyday adventurers. Same with the Meadow.

“You could very well be among them soon enough,” Ilea said.

“After your display today, Emmanuel has everyone on his side. Any cooperation he deems responsible will be approved by the nobility. If only in fear of your wrath.”

“And you’re revealing these plans to me?” Ilea asked with a strained smirk, healing her face against the shadow magic.

He looked at her and released the spell. “I need a break. I told you that because it’s as inconsequential as you telling me about your weakness. And I believe if we are to establish more than trade merely based on fear, mutual trust is the only way toward that goal. Not that it will be easy. There are plenty in this country who would rather have a war than side with an independent Ravenhall.”

“Why’s that?” Ilea asked, moving ash across her face to get rid of the blood.

“Personal vendettas, history with specific Shadows, economic interests, competition, independence. Many reasons. But none of that matters if the key players side with our king. And I believe you just gave him a strong argument.”

As long as they don’t undermine him.

“If I may give you some advice…” Asren began, looking at her.

She raised an eyebrow.

“It may be better to let the Order deal with their former Speaker. Who knows what else he has up his sleeves?”

“That’s exactly why I’m going with them. Some of them were obviously manipulated into this stupid play. It would be a shame if they died.”

The man looked at her for a long moment before he smiled ever so slightly, resuming his magic.

By the time they rejoined the Corinth Order half an hour later, Kroll’s officials and soldiers had already left.

“They left the cleanup to you,” Ilea said when she found Mateo, who was dragging half a demon corpse over to a growing pile of burning flesh. He didn’t seem bothered by the smell.

“It was us who caused this incident. And so it should be us who deal with it,” the man said, turning toward her. “You shamed us greatly today, Lilith.”

“Yeah.”

“Perhaps we deserved it,” the High Cleric said. “I have no right, and yet I must ask you. When the time to face Nathanael comes, let it be the Corinth Order that deals with him.”

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FOURTEEN

Speaker

The journey to the southern mountains took longer than Ilea had anticipated.

I'm too used to my own flight speed, she thought, flying more slowly than usual to keep pace with the rest of the formation.

Around her flew about two dozen Paladins and Inquisitors; some carried healers, others more warriors. A large number of the higher-leveled members of the Corinth Order were among them.

"What do you think?" Asren asked, flying close by.

"I don't know these people. You tell me," Ilea answered.

Joel grinned, sparks flaring off his lightning wings. "The Speaker is strong, but he's not a fighter. The Inquisitors he's got on his side are the ones they should worry about."

"There are too many unknowns," Asren said, his shadow wings barely moving. "Bryce has chosen a frontal attack to save their Order's honor and a semblance of pride. I don't think all this is necessary."

"Frontal attacks work," Joel said. "Lilith just showed as much."

"The Speaker isn't a mindless beast. He knows about everyone here, and he knows this is not a fight he can win."

"His plans failed. The longer they wait, the longer he can prepare," Ilea said.

"Yes. And yet a risk remains. I'm worried about the cards Nathanael has yet to play. He will be desperate. He isn't a man willing to lose."

“Ah, you worry too much, brother, as always,” Joel said. “Bryce will slaughter anything the Speaker can throw at them.”

“Soon, we’ll see,” Ilea said. “How long until we’re there?”

“Twenty more minutes at this pace,” Asren said.

“Right.”

“I’m glad you joined, Lilith,” Joel said with a smile. “I’d be a lot more worried without you here.”

Ilea grinned. “Sure. And you two came along to watch me?”

“Partially,” Asren said. “We have an interest in the Corinth Order, and while they should take responsibility for their situation, King Emmanuel thought it reasonable to offer some aid.”

“And someone has to keep them in check – right, Bryce?!” Joel shouted, laughing when the Paladin didn’t react.

“I thought you’d trained with him before?” Ilea asked.

“He’s usually not so tense and serious,” Joel said. “He was so ready to slaughter those demons with his group of holy warriors until you stole the moment. Brilliant fireworks, by the way. Maybe we should hire you for our next festival.”

“I charge exorbitant rates,” Ilea answered in a dry tone.

“We’ll just pay you in food. I hear you ate half our coffers’ worth,” Joel replied. “Wish I’d been there for the betting.”

“Betting?”

“On how much you’d eat. I hear Asren lost a month’s pay,” Joel said happily.

His brother frowned but didn’t comment.

“Why weren’t you there?” Ilea asked.

Joel grumbled something, and Asren replied in his stead. “He’s banned from any event involving the general nobility. For good reason.”

“It only happened twice,” Joel said, shaking his head.

“What about Jeanne?”

“Ah, yes… Jeanne. Okay, three times. No reason to still be so strict. I’ve already missed dozens of events.”

“We’re not allowed to participate anyway. You had your fair share in the kitchens, I’m sure.”

Ilea smiled. “You’ve been at this for a while, hmm?”

“Our first battle was in our mother’s womb,” Joel said.

Asren just groaned.

The lightning mage grinned. “I won.”

“Your poor mother,” Ilea said.

“Yeah. She died,” Joel said, dodging a knife thrown by his brother. “Decades later, in her own bed. Don’t act like that, Kyr, you know she despised us.”

“And here you are, proving she was right about you,” Asren answered. “Enough of this. Focus, we should expect an ambush.”

The three were flying at the rear of the loose formation. Ahead of them, Bryce was gesturing for the troops to land.

“Attack on foot?” Joel asked.

“They will expect an aerial strike,” Asren said.

They landed in a lightly forested area, mountains rising up in the distance, the range that separated the Plains from the Isanna Desert to the south.

Ilea smiled, enjoying the fresh air after being in the city and stuffy halls for a while. With her armor active, she stalked the group of fast-moving holy warriors, the same ones who likely would’ve tried to kill her had the Speaker’s plan worked out.

Space magic to the rescue. To think they were going as far as hunting healers not associated with an Order, she thought, looking at the armored people’s backs. *I wonder how many of them knew? Or approved?*

They didn’t seem particularly impressive or dangerous to her, but she knew her views were a little skewed. Based on her talks with Donnavon, Mateo, and Bryce, she could see the Corinth Order becoming a more progressive part of human society. And either way, no healer would have to fear them or any other Order anymore, not with the Sentinels around. Gael could likely take on Bryce already, and time would only increase their might.

The Corinth warriors at least seemed disciplined and experienced – even those who couldn’t fly made little sound as they rushed up the slope. She wondered how things would change for them after all this.

But first, they would meet their Speaker.

* * *

Naomi couldn’t help but glance back from time to time. The royal guard was at the back of their loose formation, but Lilith was right there.

She looked so different now. When Naomi had first met her in the sewers, the woman had seemed cocky and disinterested, a pretty normal adventurer – besides the respect she somehow managed to instill in Bryce and Donnavon. Entirely justified, as she'd learned just a few hours earlier. But during the battle with the demons, and even now, there was something more.

It was subtle, in a way. She didn't seem particularly focused, which Naomi would've interpreted as a lack of interest before, but in fact, Lilith was watching them closely. Perhaps it was curiosity, or suspicion, or simply the perspective of the founder of another Healing Order. She wasn't sure, and yet she could feel the pressure, as if Bryce was facing her in a bout.

Naomi wondered how this woman had managed to acquire the power she now wielded. A pact with a powerful creature? Some ancient class that allowed her to bypass dangers in battle? There had to be something. Some reason why the gods had allowed this to happen.

Perhaps she was sent to us by Hella herself? To guide us? To let us see the corruption within the Order, to unearth Nathanael's horrible plans? Is this what a god looks like?

Glancing over her shoulder again, she saw Lilith looking right at her.

She turned back.

Lilith's steps were loud. Her armor must've weighed quite a lot, yet she kept up without any discernible struggle. Naomi hadn't heard her complain or even breathe any louder.

Up ahead, Bryce signaled to the company to hold.

Naomi stopped behind a tree, looking up at the steep slope. No obvious path led up to the fort a few kilometers away. She had seen it before, but only Inquisitors trained within its halls.

Lilith stopped in the middle of their formation, looking up at the fort from between the foliage, her eyes moving slightly as if she was scanning the walls.

"Eight people patrolling. They will see us approach," she said.

Bryce nodded as if the woman hadn't just claimed to see people literal kilometers away. "Understood. The plan was never to attack without being seen. This angle will make it difficult for their spells to benefit from broad impacts. Highest levels, to the front. Prepare for battle, brothers and sisters."

Naomi unsheathed her two-handed sword. She could tell that Lilith's earlier demonstration had taken the wind out of their sails – even Bryce didn't sound quite as boisterous as before.

It is our own we will face, she thought as she steeled herself for the coming battle.

"Prepare for anything," Bryce added, his own sword in hand now. "Try to disable and capture where you can, but don't hesitate to kill. They are traitors to our gods." He turned toward Lilith. "What will you do?"

Everyone else glanced at the woman. They knew what she was capable of, yet it was they who had to fight this battle. To prove that the Corinth Order wasn't entirely without honor. Naomi would understand it if Lilith simply ignored their wishes. She had no reason to cooperate, yet it didn't look like she was particularly worked up.

She smiled. "I'll move with your formation and take care of enemy spells."

Bryce nodded lightly, looking up toward the fort before he turned to her again. He seemed to consider something before he turned forward again.

"Warriors of the Corinth Order. Today, we prove our worth. A time for grief will come, but not today." He paused, then stepped out into the open with his sword held high. "Charge."

Naomi rushed forward, spells roaring to life within her, her strength and speed surging as her feet pushed against the ground. Magic coursed through her weapon, a dull white glow becoming visible as she advanced, while wings appeared on her back in case she needed to dodge upward.

To her left and right, her brothers and sisters ran, though no shouts or screams announced their charge. There would be no glory today. Magic lit up the high walls of the distant fort, spheres of fire and large chunks of stone speeding out to strike their position.

"Brace!" a few people shouted.

Naomi was ready to dodge when the projectiles stopped in the air, then flew back toward the fort instead.

What?

She looked around, still running. The other warriors were just as confused. Her eyes fell on Lilith, her black wings moving silently.

Was it her? Who else could it be?

It didn't matter. Naomi allowed herself a smile. The gods were with them, one way or another.

* * *

Ilea displaced a few more rounds of spells flying toward the group, though her aim with the return fire wasn't particularly good.

Practice makes perfect, she thought, watching a few fireballs and stone projectiles impact the still distant walls. She couldn't see the people atop the defensive structures particularly well, but their red armor stood out enough.

She considered sending a few ashen spears at the defenders, blasting their entire fort to bits with her gathered heat, but she stopped herself. The people charging the fort now were looking for a chance to redeem themselves. These weren't demons they were facing, and she had already proven her point. This time, she would stand aside. Mostly.

She moved along with them and kept herself in the middle of their formation.

They reached the fort less than a minute later, the high-level humans pushing forward with magically enhanced bodies and wings on their backs. Paladins carried Inquisitors, and they all landed on the walls with their weapons and spells at the ready, clashing with the defending side as blasts started to impact the fort from within. Steel hit steel as people shouted and screamed.

Ilea caught a warrior who had taken a fiery blast against his chest right just as he'd landed. She healed the confused combatant and threw him back into the fray, watching him land with a practiced roll before he slashed into the mage who had injured him moments before.

He looked up and saluted her before he jumped down into the yard beyond.

Both sides had their own dedicated healers who weren't directly participating in the battle but taking care of the injured. It seemed neither side targeted them. Not intentionally, at the very least.

Ilea appeared in front of a young woman clad in a white robe trying to heal an Inquisitor's severed arm. The healer looked up and nearly stumbled when a large boulder impacted Ilea's back, deflecting off her armor and crashing against a set of stone stairs.

She checked the people around her with her dominion but soon found it unnecessary. Bryce's force had entirely overwhelmed the defenders in a matter of a few minutes. Most of them were severely injured and captured,

and some even lay down their weapons when they saw the Head Paladin charging toward them.

He really was a different beast compared to everyone else present, moving faster, hitting harder, white lightning spells disabling entire groups of Inquisitors. Bryce didn't hesitate, giving orders here and there as his Paladins dismantled their foes.

Mostly Inquisitors, Ilea noted. Few of them were above level two hundred, and Bryce took out those who were with quick teleports and flurries of attacks. They knew who would pose a danger.

As she stood there, Ilea saw a hooded figure appear below them, down in the storage halls. She transferred herself down and grabbed the man's hand, stopping his attempt to set something alight with his torch.

"No… you mustn't!" he shouted.

Ilea looked at the crate next to him and found it covered in dark powder. "Explosives, I assume?"

"Friede, welcome me within your arms…" the man murmured as magic gathered around him.

As they both reappeared in the yard a split second later, a surge of fire flared out of the man's left hand, aimed at where the crates had been a moment earlier. Instead, the flames enveloped Ilea, who flicked the man's head, knocking him out as his body slapped against the stone ground.

"Bryce, there's explosive powder below the yard. Expect the worst," she said, loud enough that the Head Paladin would hear her.

He nodded her way. "Gather the prisoners. The ten highest veterans, with me; everyone else, retreat to the treeline!"

The warriors followed his orders immediately, gathering up all the survivors and healers before they rushed to jump over the walls.

Ilea followed the remaining Paladins, staying behind them. They descended a few stairwells, checking rooms and halls on the way. It seemed like they were familiar with the place.

Bryce moved toward a large set of gilded double doors leading deeper into the structure, charging at them with his shoulder. The gates exploded inward, wood splintering and crashing against the stone walls within.

She felt the attack coming the moment she crossed the threshold, turning her head back.

Oh.

The explosion was deafening. Several hallways, including the one they had come through, exploded, fire intermingling with wood and stone as debris and heat shot out.

Ilea displaced their entire group down the hallway and deeper into the structure, deflecting incoming stone bricks and half a stairwell with ash. The Paladins stumbled and caught themselves, seemingly unfazed by the experience as they checked the hall for threats.

“Entrance is sealed,” one of them reported.

“No shit,” Ilea said, looking up at the ceiling, which seemed to be holding on to its structural integrity for dear life. Beyond, debris had sealed every way out.

“Move,” Bryce said, and the group rushed deeper into the installation.

Ilea remained where she was for a moment, hearing dulled impacts as half the fort seemed to collapse onto the mountainside. *Not a blood ritual, at least, but those were impressive explosives,* she thought, wondering if she had just seen something like gunpowder for the first time in Elos.

She stayed behind the Paladins as they methodically checked every room. They soon reached an expansive hall carved out deep within the mountain, where what seemed to be the last defensive line of Nathanael’s Inquisitors waited for them.

Among them was the man himself, standing behind a loose line of twelve warriors. He wore the white robes of the High Clerics, a short gray beard covering his chin. His blue eyes immediately fell on Ilea, despite the large armor of the Paladins ahead.

“Just as I prophesied! The demon has turned our brethren against us,” he said, his voice deep, laced with disappointment. His eye twitched as he turned his attention to the Head Paladin. “Bryce. Has her magic poisoned your mind?”

“You have conspired to murder High Cleric Donnavon, to kill Lilith, and to spark a conflict with Ravenhall. To think you would stoop so low as to summon demons,” Bryce said, his eyes focused on the man. “Former Speaker. And Inquisitors. Lay down your weapons and be judged before our gods. Or forfeit all that you swore to be.”

“We stand with you, Speaker,” one of the Inquisitors beside Nathanael said.

Ilea noticed the Speaker was looking at her again. As the battle erupted, he remained where he stood, still focused on her.

[Pure Healer – lvl 258]

One of the Inquisitors appeared next to Ilea, stabbing his rapier at her eye. The attack failed to penetrate, and his confusion was apparent as she grabbed the weapon and threw it to the side, watching him retreat before one of the Paladins grievously wounded his leg.

"Truly, a monster like no other," the Speaker said in a quiet voice. He grabbed the top of his robe and ripped it open to reveal his chest. Numerous runes had been carved into his flesh, and pieces of steel were stuck deep within. As magic surged around him, two Inquisitors died keeping the Paladins away from him; the rest were either injured or dead by now.

Nathanael kept his head high, looking at Ilea with tired eyes. "You murdered my daughter. May the gods strike you down."

Magic surged, and the Paladins jumped back as the Speaker's body bulged out, silver plate armor forming on his now two-meter-tall body. Powerful muscles showed below, claws and teeth resembling a wild beast forming as the creature howled.

The Speaker no longer had eyes; everything but his extending maw was covered in smooth silver, and his hands gripped a spear of the same material. The tip of the weapon flared with radiant energy similar to the lightning Bryce had used before.

[Vengeful Beast of the Corinth – lvl 382] – [Frenzied / Dying]

"Lilith," Bryce said, appearing in front of her. "This is our battle."

As she watched the Paladins charge at the howling monster, one thought kept running through Ilea's mind.

I murdered his daughter?

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FIFTEEN

Paladin

Ilea tried to remember any members of the Corinth Order she had fought and killed. She considered the woman who had attacked her after the Basilisk encounter but couldn't remember if she'd been part of the Order. The only other person she could think of was the healer working with the Riverwatch smugglers. Ilea knew she had been part of the Corinth Order.

But she hadn't cared in the slightest that they were moving slaves, showed no remorse, and spewed threats until the last moment.

Was everything that happened today because of that healer? And what happened in Riverwatch?

I don't even remember her name.

She thought back to the Speaker's look. The fury in his eyes. There had been regret, too. Was the man so consumed by revenge that he would sacrifice himself in a last attempt to take her down with him?

Ilea watched the battle unfold. The Paladins were circling the creature, attacking its back whenever it focused on one of them. All were experienced fighters, exuding calm as they probed its defenses.

Ilea wondered if she should intervene, if she should face the Speaker herself, as he had intended. If only to prevent any of the Paladins from dying. She didn't owe the man anything, nor did she regret what had happened. And still, if she had killed his daughter, she respected his grief and his wish for vengeance.

It still didn’t feel right. Not with the people here who had been betrayed, itching to prove themselves, to get their own revenge and perhaps some sort of redemption.

She chose to stand back, watching as the Speaker’s silver spear pierced the armor of a Paladin, who stumbled back before she fell, clasping the wound. Ilea displaced the woman behind her. She chose not to heal her for now. The Speaker had betrayed all of them. He seemed willing to forsake his entire Order to get his vengeance.

Ilea would leave the Paladins to their battle. If it came to it, she would finish the job. If she could prevent their deaths, she would. But they weren’t exactly her allies either. So far, the Corinth Order had only caused her problems, and even now, the only reason they were somewhat cooperative seemed to be her overwhelming power. Not exactly a precedent for fruitful cooperation. Saving lives indirectly would help more than killing the Speaker herself. She hoped the future would be different, though it would all depend on the actions of Bryce and the High Clerics.

Another two Paladins got hit by the spear, the surging energy within it throwing them to the side. Blood splattered to the ground as one of them tried to get his entrails back into his stomach. Ilea teleported them behind her, giving the man a hand before she healed the wound herself. All the color disappeared from his face as he fell on his ass, looking at her with shame in his eyes.

She didn’t comment on it, remembering her own battles against higher-level creatures back when she’d been in the two hundreds. Plenty of limbs and organs had been lost, though it seemed the Paladins’ healing was simply inadequate. They recovered fast, but not fast enough to take hits like that in an ongoing fight.

They were no battle healers, though she had to admit that their strikes and strength were beyond what she could dish out at that level. Bryce had just deflected a blow that would’ve taken the head of one of his comrades, saving Ilea the use of her space magic.

The former Speaker had dozens of dents and cuts in his armor now, thick blood flowing from the wounds beneath. He hadn’t slowed down much, but the Paladins were pressuring him. Eight remained.

When one of the injured warriors tried to rejoin the battle, Ilea raised her hand. “You had your go.”

The woman looked at her with furious eyes beneath her helmet. “You want to watch them die?!”

Ilea displaced a Paladin who had lost both his legs, her healing preventing him from bleeding out in the seconds.

“She saved you, listen to her…” said the man whose stomach had been cut.

Ilea had known the battle was over as soon as Bryce had exchanged blows with the being. He was perhaps even capable of facing it alone. With the others there to distract and damage it, the creature was dead.

The monster managed to pierce one of the warriors through his chest, energies spreading before the Paladin’s body vanished and reappeared next to Ilea. Her third-tier healing restored his heart in an instant, but his shoulders and thighs ruptured because of her lack of familiarity with his body. Everything else seemed to be in order, however.

Close one, that.

She gave the man a glance, watching him grasp at the hole in his chest plate, then moved her attention back to the battle.

Without my understanding of spatial frameworks, he’d be dead. I’m getting pretty good at the healing side of things.

Bryce used the opening to slice through one of the Speaker’s arms, his blade shining with power as he painted the hall with blood. The others were more cautious, only moving between the monster and Bryce when an obvious opening presented itself.

Slowly, they overwhelmed the creature, injuries mounting as it slowed more and more, its spear now swiping aimlessly from side to side. Ilea watched the warriors closely, but none of them grew overconfident; in fact, their approach was even more cautious now that the monster was close to death’s door.

Finally, Bryce stepped into its range and deflected an obvious blow, his sword burning bright with magic before he sliced through the Speaker’s neck. A clean strike. His eyes remained focused on the spear as he jumped back to assess the creature.

“Dead?” Ilea asked.

“Yes,” one of the Paladins behind her said.

She checked the body through her dominion, just in case there was a hidden trap, a rune that would cause an explosion of blood upon its death, or something else. But the corpse was just that. A corpse.

Approaching the fallen beast again, Bryce swiped his sword across its neck. Blood splattered to the ground as the blade heated up, burning away whatever was still stuck to it. He took off his helmet, his eyes focused on the head he had removed.

“May you find rest,” he whispered, a fist to his heart. “The Speaker has fallen.”

The other Paladins didn’t celebrate, instead tending to the surviving Inquisitors while watching for more enemies.

“Well fought,” Ilea said as she walked past the Head Paladin.

“A mindless beast,” Bryce murmured. “Thank you, Lilith. We will not forget this, nor your many interventions to save lives.”

“Make sure it’s not wasted,” Ilea answered, heading toward the next hallway. More to give them space than because of any interest.

A moment later, Bryce started giving orders to his team, while she began checking the various rooms with her dominion. There were weapons, pieces of armor, and some valuables, but nothing she was bothered about.

“Done with your inspection?” Bryce asked when she returned. The corpses were now covered by sheets of white cloth. A few of the Paladins had started searching the rooms as well, while others were trying to clear a path through the rubble blocking the entrance.

“Nothing much of interest,” she answered. “I assume they’ve been using this place for a while.”

“We will study the runes on his body. To think Nathanael would go this far.” He shook his head sadly. “He mentioned his daughter before his change.”

“I heard him, yes. Did you know her?”

“I did. Her name was Pan. She didn’t return from a mission to Riverwatch a few years ago. I’m aware that the Speaker himself sent a team out. May I inquire about her death?”

“So it *was* her. She was hired by a group of smugglers. They traded slaves. She threatened me a few times, invoking the name of the Corinth Order. I killed her in the end.”

Bryce sighed. “Slaves. And she knew. He knew. There is much that we must face.”

“You’re the Head Paladin. Why have you turned out different? The impressions I had of your Order before coming to Halstein weren’t good, I’ll be honest.”

“Dawntree happened. I… and others… had to ignore orders to save people, instead of slaughtering civilians. They called them rebels and criminals. Many of them still hold positions in our Order, though they’re no longer quite as vocal. I hope the humbling experiences of the past years have shaken their arrogance.”

“I very much doubt that.”

“I said I was hopeful. But with Donnavon and Mateo at the top, I believe we have a realistic road to sustainable change. We have to.”

“You could also make something new instead.”

“I grew up within the temples of the Corinth Order, trained and learned from their members. I look up to many of them. Some did good where they could, others thought they were doing the same. I will not give up on our Order. This is our lowest point, and only here can we find change. I killed the Speaker with my own two hands. There is no way back, only the road forward.”

“I wish you luck. And know that if I find out that any of your members are still killing or threatening independent healers, I’ll come knocking.”

“And I’ll join you in looking for those responsible. Let us hope it does not come to that. Today has taught us many lessons. I believe anyone with even a speck of wisdom will have a lot to think about in the coming weeks and months,” Bryce said. “I look forward to seeing your Sentinels work. If they’re anywhere near as impressive as you are, the coming decades will definitely be interesting.”

“They most certainly will be,” Ilea answered with a smile, thinking about all the projects currently underway.

I’m starting to think about it differently, too. I was scared and done with the Plains after what happened to Eve and Trian, after what we did in Virilya.

She looked at the Paladins around her. An ancient Healing Order now set on a new path, hopefully, and she was primarily responsible. The same was true for her impact in Riverwatch. Lord Harken likely would’ve taken the city had she not been there. And who knows what would’ve happened in Baralia without her being part of the Golden Lily team.

The Meadow would still be in Erendar, too. And now it’s here, protecting Hallowfort, and helping us study the Taleen gates and network.

And all the while, the Sentinels are starting to make a name for themselves. A lot of things are changing, a lot of things are moving, and I

guess I can't deny that I'm a part of all that.

Now. I guess the situation with the Corinth Order is dealt with.

"There's a lot to do. Will you stay?" Bryce asked, taking her out of her thoughts.

Ilea smiled. "No. I'll explore Halstein a little, I suppose. I'm sure we'll get the chance to talk again once your Order is in a less chaotic state."

"You will always be welcome." Bryce paused, smiling slightly as he looked at the Paladins carrying rubble away from the caved-in entrance. "I don't suppose you could help with that?"

"Can't smite your way through?"

"It would take a while. Maybe you could show off one last time?" Bryce suggested. "We'll prepare a feast for you when you visit next."

"Nice try."

She displaced the working Paladins aside, a large drill of ash forming in front of her before it started spinning. She walked into the rubble, pulverized rock and wood collecting behind her as she made her way through the remains of the fort. Finally, Ilea broke out on the other side to find a devastated battlefield.

That explosion did quite some work. Claire would be proud.

She tried to find a barrel or crate in the storage rooms underground with her spherical perception, but everything seemed to be gone. Her ash armor receded as she stepped out into the open, her clothes immaculate, to find not only a few Paladins but also Joel and Asren waiting for her.

A Paladin rushed out from within the tunnel, giving Ilea a wide berth before she joined up with the other members of her Order, relaying Bryce's commands.

Joel grumbled something, handing a pouch to his brother. Asren remained silent, nodding to Ilea with a grateful expression.

"What was the bet?" she asked, stretching as she joined them. "And I don't suppose you have the formula for whatever alchemical agent caused that explosion?"

"I thought you disliked discussing trade?" Asren said.

"You're right. I'm sure your queen can work something out with Ravenhall. Let her know there may be interest there," Ilea said. "The bet?"

"You're the first one out. Not a drop of blood on you."

Ilea glanced at Joel. "You thought I'd get hurt?"

The man smiled. “No. I said you would teleport up. Asren suggested you would help the others out.”

“I see,” she smiled.

“I’m sure I’d help out a lot too, with that kind of power,” Joel said.

“No you wouldn’t,” Asren stated.

Joel looked at the tunnel. “Yeah, probably not.”

“Think I’m done here for the moment. Care to give me that tour you mentioned?” she asked, winking at the Kingsguard. She could do with a bit of a break before working on her skills some more or visiting another Healing Order.

Joel looked at her, smirking as he shook his head. “I’m afraid one of us has to remain here to make sure the Corinth don’t summon more demons.”

Ilea looked between the two brothers. She was pretty sure at least one of them would hate that job, which made the situation a little confusing.

Then Joel punched his brother and walked past them. “You did win the bet, after all.”

Asren straightened a little, a slight smirk on his face as he looked at his brother. Then he turned to Ilea. “I would gladly give you a tour, if you would have me.”

I see, Ilea thought, seeing Joel roll his eyes with her dominion. “If either of you is wondering, I’m not interested in a political relationship.”

“A shame. I would’ve hunted the courting gift myself,” Asren said with a dry tone. He walked closer and stopped by her side. “I’m sure you’re aware of my capabilities. Perhaps you’d be interested in a tour of our capital involving the creations of its highest-level cooks.”

“Bribing me with food isn’t going to work more than once.”

“Damn, I was hoping that would work. I lack a few hundred levels to impress you with magic, I’m afraid,” Asren said. “Though I do know some beautiful spots in Halstein.”

Ilea smiled, extending her hand. “All magic is impressive, Asren. But I suppose I won’t say no to a nice view either.”

Asren spread his wings and gently took her hand.

She smiled, spreading her ashen wings as well. “I suggest you hold on tight.”

The man didn’t hesitate, gripping the spreading ash and her arm and bracing himself.

“Try not to pass out,” she said.

Then her wings vibrated with power, and they shot off toward Halstein.

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SIXTEEN

Sightseeing

“It’s said that fourteen craftsmen worked on it for seven weeks,” Asren explained, his eyes on the fountain below them.

Ilea looked at the two winged stone creatures frozen in an endless battle. *Their stances make sense. I appreciate that.*

She closed her eyes, enjoying the food an armored and hooded figure had delivered to them a few minutes earlier. She could get used to this treatment, though her storage items made the whole thing kind of obsolete.

Ilea watched the busy streets below as she ate the rest of her meal. Halstein was quite extensive, spreading over the hills with various monumental structures towering over simple stone buildings. Many of its alleys were narrow and bustling with people. A single high wall, broad and well patrolled, protected the residents against monster attacks from the wilderness.

While the capital couldn’t quite match the extensive size of Virilya, it was clear that it was old, with domes and spiraling towers sprouting upward throughout. There was certainly a lot of wealth here. Riverwatch had seemed like a provincial town compared to Kroll’s capital. And yet it felt a little boring to her. Pretentious, perhaps. The place felt somewhat stuck in its ways, but it was just a feeling.

They stayed silent, enjoying the cool breeze flowing over the terrace of the high government building Asren had chosen as their destination for lunch.

“The sunsets are lovely from here,” he said in a quiet tone.

“I can imagine,” Ilea said, thinking of the ocean view from her house. Wings really gave her a different appreciation for the vastness of the world. It also helped that most of the Plains consisted of uninhabited wilderness. You could pretty much have a wonderful view wherever you were.

“Can you see the building over there?” Asren asked, pointing toward the northwestern part of the city.

“The complex with walls of its own? And a bunch of trees… People fighting each other, I think.”

He blinked. “What you see is the Halstein school of magic. Where young nobles learn and train alongside the children of wealthy families from all over the country.”

“Didn’t know you had a magic school.”

For the wealthy only. Because of course.

“Yes. It’s unusual, but compared to, say, Lys, it’s necessary. Lys has the… well, I wouldn’t call it a benefit, but here we are… the benefit of far-reaching international conflicts. Nobility learn to fight and work together in their esteemed military. Our nobility had to find other avenues,” Asren explained.

Ilea looked at him for a long moment. “Really? There’s wilderness all around. They could just go out there.”

“Many do not wish to face unpredictable dangers. Besides, while levels matter, fighting other people is something that is better trained in a controlled environment. Should a conflict arise in the future, it’s better to be prepared. Training with powerful peers and sharing knowledge and experiences is what lays the foundation for the many alliances that form the web of power within Kroll. Some even go on to become adventurers for a time after they graduate.”

He talks about that like it’s some exotic thing. No wonder there are so few people at level three hundred or higher around. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Most people here would gawk at a Shadow.

“I told the faculty that I’d be visiting this afternoon, to train with the students and give some pointers. Perhaps you’d be interested in joining me?”

She thought about it for a moment. She could leave and work on her own skills or go and help the Sentinels, if they needed it. But with her teleportation, she could be there at a moment’s notice.

Nobles, training at a magical academy. Maybe.

I could scope out the competition.

She smiled slightly, realizing there was more to it.

I feel almost nostalgic for a life I didn't get to have. Studying at an academy of some kind.

"Sure. Sounds like an afternoon."

"I thought you'd be interested. My duties generally prevent me from visiting, but Joel and I received orders to look after both the Corinth and Lilith. I do believe it would do the students good to fight someone like you, if only to show how insignificant their current power truly is. Most of them may never get that opportunity until it's too late or do the smart thing and form an adventuring group. Even then, however, the first time they encounter a formidable monster could be their last."

"It's a valuable lesson, I agree. I'll be happy to join."

As he stood up and offered his hand, Ilea noted the tension in his legs and arm as he helped her up, neither his face nor posture betraying his slight struggle.

Violence would enjoy seeing this.

"I still didn't get a Shadow Magic Resistance," Ilea said. "Perhaps you could indulge me on the way?"

"Certainly," Asren said. "There are a few wonderful architectural marvels if you'd prefer to walk?"

"Sure," Ilea said with a smile. The two jumped off the building together, slowing their fall with separate sets of wings and landing gently.

Architectural marvels, a city tour by some shadowy Kingsguard, and now I get to visit the local magic academy. I'm not sure what happened, but I'll enjoy it while it lasts.

* * *

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Shadow Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Shadow Magic Resistance – lvl 1
A sub-school of light magic allowing for a highly specialized set of tools to both incapacitate and kill. A more subtle approach and finesse are

required to realize this magic's true potential. You have faced and survived encounters with masters of its use, making you more resilient against it.

Ilea was eating ice cream. She had missed out on a few things Asren said because of that fact.

She focused again as they reached the gated entrance to the premises of the magic school.

"Lord Fiore," said an armored mage standing behind the gate, fueling a nearby enchantment that opened the entrance.

The man bowed when they entered, though he gave Ilea a long look. She was just wearing casual clothes and eating ice cream. Ilea noted the ten fancy throwing knives and two daggers on his belt.

[Time Mage – lvl 208]

That's a rare one, she mused. *Already have that maxed for now, and I doubt this one will push me to the third tier.*

This place is fancy.

"Should I inform the principal of your guest?" the man asked.

"No. I'm sure Lady Lilith can introduce herself to the students," Asren said as he walked ahead. "Thank you."

The time mage and Ilea locked eyes as she ate her ice cream. She couldn't resist using her Deviant of Humanity aura for just a split second, and she watched the man stumble back, his eyes wide.

Asren had his blades drawn, armor suddenly covering his body as he turned around, ready to face the monster he'd sensed.

"Was that… That was you, wasn't it?" he asked, peering behind her to see if he hadn't missed something.

Maybe I shouldn't do shit like this if even the Head Kingsguard of a major kingdom nearly gets a heart attack from my presence?

…Nah.

"Yeah, sorry. It slipped out," she said with a grin as she joined him.

Asren cocked his head at her before he began walking again, his armor vanishing again. "A lesson is important. However, I'm not sure how beneficial deep mental scars to the future leaders of our kingdom will be."

Ilea beamed at him. This was getting more fun. “Getting nervous?”

“I brought you here. And to my surprise, I trust you,” Asren said. “But it’s easy to forget the ashen creature who slaughtered a horde of demons when you’re walking around with ice cream, of all things.”

“Just use Identify to remind yourself,” she said, nibbling on the cone.

“How can you mask it, anyway? And why doesn’t it work against me?”

“Trying to get state secrets out of this date? I see where your heart lies, Kingsguard,” she said as they walked past a large building, muffled magical impacts audible within.

Most of the complex was filled with grass and trees, cared for by a few nature mages, one of whom was funneling magic into a nearby tree.

Asren smiled. “I like to be efficient. And who knows how many spies are following us? I can’t be too self-serving.”

Aren’t you the spymaster here?

“Poor you,” Ilea said as they passed a four-story structure with rich marble decorations, its large windows on the ground floor suggesting an extensive hall beyond. Blue tiles covered the roof, and smaller terraces adorned the sides of the building.

A few groups of students had started looking their way, some of them glancing down from the windows or terraces, wondering who the woman with Lord Fiore could be. One young man suggested it was Lilith, but he received a few mocking insults for the ridiculous proposal.

“Though I’m sure you can imagine the reactions the nobility would have to this ‘date’, if you would call it such,” Asren said.

A politician after all, Ilea thought.

She was starting to lose interest in the man. There seemed to be too many considerations and ulterior motives due to his position and background. She didn’t blame him for it; she wasn’t exactly an everyday girl herself, after all. If anything, the situation made her appreciate her friends back in Ravenhall, Hallowfort, and the Krahen Isles even more.

Feyrair, for one, couldn’t give less of a shit about her status. To the Meadow, Ilea was barely intelligent enough to be considered awakened, and her team had known her for so long that they just thought her antics silly. She smiled as she thought of Kyrian, who would surely find himself in similar situations soon enough.

“The training fields,” Asren said, gesturing to an extensive pit filled with trees, boulders, and even a small pond. The entire area seemed

deliberately crafted, allowing for ambushes, defensible positions, and exposed elevated areas.

Ilea wasn't terribly impressed, even though she had enjoyed the ridiculous training ground at Eregar's Haven. This felt too sterile for some reason. Exactly what an academy would provide. Most of the battlegrounds she fought on were just boring caves or empty fields. Then again, her approach didn't exactly require a lot of tactical consideration.

"The faculty is expecting us in about half an hour, but perhaps we can garner some interest now," he added.

"Let's see what they can do, then," Ilea said, then jumped down into the training area. About a dozen students were already present, some hiding as they waited to ambush their foes, others comparing spells.

Ilea quickly donned some leather armor on top of her clothes, though her ash mantle was still present near her neck following the day's events. She hardly thought there was any danger to her here, but being overconfident was usually a mistake.

The thought made her remember someone. "What's the deal with that druid healer who was with the King?"

"Lady Veyers? She's been part of Kroll's nobility for… a long time. And she's an important advisor to the King," Asren said, his voice taking on a more calculated tone.

"She seemed like an experienced mage. Notably so," Ilea said. She wouldn't try to explain what she felt from the woman; she hardly understood it herself, after all.

Asren didn't seem suspicious. "I assume her age is responsible for that. I'm sure you're more perceptive than others. I've never thought her especially striking, though I don't presume to compare myself to you."

"I see," Ilea said, looking at two young women who had appeared in front of them, the first to notice them. They bowed, though their entire focus was on the man next to her.

"Greetings, Lord Fiore. We heard you might visit this afternoon," one of them said with a bright smile.

Popular, is he?

Both of them wore clean, well-cut battle garments, lightly armored and lined with bronze and silver. It seemed the materials were chosen for harmony and style rather than defensive quality. The colors matched their respective hairstyles.

“Greetings, Joanne and… Helia, was it?” Asren said with a smile.

Ilea saw joy light up the girls’ faces as he got both their names right.

Let’s see if you get the guys’ right, too, or you might risk plummeting in my estimation.

The man gestured to Ilea, forcing their attention away from himself. “May I introduce you to Lilith?”

“Lilith?” one of them asked. “As in, the real Lilith?”

The other woman bowed lightly. “Greetings, Lady Lilith. I’m Helia Waad. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise,” Ilea said.

[Water Mage – lvl 83]
[Light Mage – lvl 112]

She wondered at the idea of the two girls getting absolutely ripped apart by a level fifty Sentinel. It made her proud and a little terrified of the monsters they had set upon the world.

Maybe I shouldn’t judge them before I’ve seen them fight. Who knows? I might be surprised. Let’s give them a chance to prove themselves.

Helia at least seemed nice; Joanne was obviously quite annoyed that someone had taken away a fraction of her deserved attention. If looks could kill… Well, she was a light magic user, so the idiom was likely closer to reality in her case.

“Tom, Green, Valot,” Asren greeted a group of men who now joined them.

Charming after all, Ilea thought, smiling to herself, which somehow seemed to annoy the light mage even more.

The three men wore both curious expressions and high-quality light armor without any blemishes.

Do they not fight each other here? Or do they just get the fancy dresses out for Asren?

“You must be Lady Lilith. Here on a date? May I interest you in an upgrade?” one of them said in an overly pompous voice. As he bowed, his peers could barely contain their snickering.

Ilea ignored the obvious bait. Instead, she just watched the students.

Was I like that back when I walked onto the university grounds? They barely seem older than twenty. The same age as some of the Sentinels.

The difference felt striking.

In front of her were wealthy kids who thought themselves important and capable. Asren hadn’t been kidding. She didn’t blame them either; it was likely just the consequence of growing up with wealth and power.

The fact that they would likely one day inherit that power did make her feel a bit uneasy, though. They needed experience, and she could maybe provide a little bit. Still, all of them hovered around level one hundred, so she’d have to be very careful not to accidentally kill them.

No sudden movements, Ilea.

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SEVENTEEN

Lessons

She smiled at the group. “Is that the way you usually treat unidentifiable adventurers?”

The youth who had spoken seemed caught off guard a little, his performance likely born of a bet that perhaps didn’t seem like the best idea in hindsight.

“I meant no offense, Miss,” he said with a charming smile. “We were wondering who was walking by Lord Fiore’s side. It seemed appropriate to suggest Lady Lilith, as there were rumors of her visit to the Corinth Order today.”

“Just to be clear,” Asren said, “this *is* Lady Lilith, founder of the Medic Sentinel Corps.”

The guys seemed confused, then shocked.

Now you believe it? Not when you see a battle healer with two question marks? I guess it’s just my getup. They do seem young.

“I wanted to show her the school of magic and introduce her to some of the young talent honing their skills here,” Asren said. “Since you’re already here, maybe you’d be willing to show off a little?”

Ilea glanced at the shadow mage. *Oh you.*

“Are you sure?” one of the men asked, looking at her.

“It’s a bout, then? What exactly are the boundaries, and who wants to join?” Ilea asked.

“Everyone here against Lilith. I suggest they start over there,” Asren said, pointing at a bunch of strategically placed rocks to provide cover. “And you, Lilith, start here.” He smiled. “I’d suggest no killing.”

“All of us? Isn’t that a little unfair?” one of the men asked, rolling his shoulders as he winked at her.

Ilea gave the other two credit; one was just slightly unsure, but the last one was terrified as he looked at her. *I’ll kill you last*, she thought, smiling at him as sweetly as she could.

“Lilith has powerful defenses. It would surprise me if you could injure her,” Asren said as he stepped aside. “The fight is over when one side is incapacitated.”

The five students assented without further questions, likely having hoped Asren would suggest a bout after they heard about his visit.

Ilea watched them take up their positions, waiting in her spot with her arms crossed. More onlookers had joined by now, talking among themselves or setting up bets. Those too far away to identify her made some terrible miscalculations.

Just more and more inexperience. It feels like they’re living in their own little world in this academy. Or they’ve simply been taught really stupid lessons by their caretakers.

“I’m ready when you are,” Ilea said.

Asren snapped his fingers, and the students attacked.

Magic flared up behind their cover, projectiles and beams flashing toward her. Ilea raised her brows, impressed by the intensity of their magic. *Good Classes for their levels*, she thought, smiling when she saw Helia hesitate with her condensing water beam after Ilea had remained stationary.

She displaced the spells and started walking to the side. She stopped the water beam that was eventually shot at her with the palm of her hand, then slapped a chunk of stone aside with her wrist.

Wonderful. They’re even weaker than I thought. Were my Classes like that at level one hundred? No way. Though I guess I need to face some close-quarters fighters to assess that.

Ilea stopped near a large tree and sank her fingers into it, a limb of ash forming a scythe-like blade before slashing it near its base. She casually turned toward the group. “Here you go,” she said, throwing the tree horizontally.

They all hid behind their cover instead of dodging or teleporting away. One of the guys straight up stared at the incoming projectile until his friend dragged him back down.

She looked up at Asren and shrugged. *I don't even know what to say,* she thought, turning back to the students and slowly walking toward their cover as they scrambled to aim their spells at her.

Ilea whistled, freezing everyone in the vicinity. Playtime was over. If Asren wanted them to get a lesson, she would oblige. Ilea displaced the five students close to her and grabbed each one with a few ashen limbs. She didn't have to use her Deviant aura to terrify them.

"Some monsters above your own level can paralyze you with just a screech or roar," she said, watching them start to writhe when the effects wore off. "Your teleportation won't work once their bodies or magic touches you. Generally speaking."

Ilea considered breaking a few bones but decided against it. The Sentinels knew what they'd signed up for and could heal themselves, but this would feel like torturing puppies.

Instead, she just teleported them about thirty meters into the air, watching them fall, screaming. She caught them a few meters above the ground. Only two of them looked like they'd been about to make a non-lethal landing.

Panic and fear clouded their minds.

"What do you do when you're faced with a beast that can kill you in a single strike?" she asked, stepping up to the guy who had been terrified before. Surprisingly, he seemed a little calmer now.

"You… run…" he said.

"Exactly."

Ilea threw him to the side. The man hit the ground with a pained yelp before he stumbled up and ran toward a slope leading out of the pit.

"When you see an enemy stand still, faced with the might of your magic, what could it mean?" she asked the remaining group.

"That our magic is… inconsequential," Helia answered.

"Or they're terrified of your might. Though I suppose both may warrant a pause to consider. The least you should do is make some distance and observe. But I suppose it might already be too late at that point."

"Why are you doing this?!" Joanne shouted. "Do you enjoy this?"

Ilea walked over to her. "You agreed to a bout, did you not?"

She remained silent.

“You identified me and learned that I’m far above your level. You heard that I’m Lilith, but you didn’t believe it, even when Asren said as much. You’re lucky I’m not an actual demon, because then you’d long since be dead.”

Joanne gritted her teeth but remained quiet. Ilea looked into her eyes and doubted the woman would get anything valuable out of this.

If this isn’t going to teach her anything, only the real thing will manage. But somehow I doubt she’d ever join an actual adventuring team.

She let them go and addressed the onlookers. “Anybody who wants to test their spells and abilities, feel free. I’ll provide what pointers I can.”

It took a few seconds for anybody to react. Helia was the first to walk up to her. “Can I test my spells on you?”

“Go ahead.”

“Are you sure?” Helia asked as water formed in front of her hand.

“You can’t hurt me. I’ll even bet ten gold pieces on that.”

The challenge incited a few of the onlookers, some of whom jumped down into the pit.

“Lady Lilith? Does that wager apply to everyone?” a man asked, lightning crackling around him as he approached. He was at level one twenty.

“Of course,” she answered, layering her ash armor.

“Are we just going to take that, Halstein?” the man asked as he circled her, addressing the growing student body.

What is this? A high school recess brawl?

It certainly felt that way when more and more people started shouting and mages formed a loose circle around her. Ilea positioned herself in such a way that nobody would be directly behind her. She didn’t trust them not to injure each other.

Time to humble some people.

* * *

Ilea watched the next student circle her, a few dozen spells impacting her side. As she maneuvered him against the side of the pit and grabbed his arm, his ice flower spell exploded in her armored face, shards of frozen water hitting her eyes and shattering.

“Got you. Well done for aiming for my eyes,” she told the terrified young mage with a smile before she tossed him aside, his body impacting the ground four times before he came to a stop.

Bruises… oh, he broke a rib. Let me fix that, she thought, healing the injury through her dominion.

She looked at the large group of students running around to reposition themselves. Some of their faces were spattered with blood, while ash and dust covered their armor. Most were panting, and groups of two or three were getting the injured out of the way.

They’re almost starting to look like actual adventurers.

Ilea could’ve used Monster Hunter once more to freeze them in place again, sent ashen limbs or copies after them, or used her heat spells to incinerate all of them at once. However, for this ‘dangerous’ group of individuals, she needed to think about next-level tactics. Evolved, so to speak.

Most of them had been running on magical fumes for quite some time, having shot their load early in a pride-boosted effort to take down the surely-not-as-impressive-as-the-songs-claimed walking myth of Ravenhall. A valiant effort for sure. Perhaps they’d be enough to stop one or even two demon spawn.

She had exceeded their expectations, then shocked them as she changed from a brisk walk to a light jog. Ilea giggled to herself as she saw their terrified expressions, the fear near-palpable in the air. All of them had seen dozens of students roughly thrown around, some even losing consciousness. The sound of breaking bones, coupled with pained yelps and screams, had really changed the feel of this bout.

Even so, Ilea was still enjoying herself as much as at the beginning. Their confident grins had turned to despair, more so with each passing minute. Spells still impacted her, though they were less frequent and less powerful than at the start. Perhaps an impressive display to a local Ruby rank adventurer, but to someone who regularly faced ancient monsters capable of summoning miniature suns or tempests, they may as well have been children throwing rubber toys.

She waved to the faculty members now watching outside the pit with Asren, only the latter waving back.

Have they never seen a Shadow? They’d slaughter this bunch

As she picked up speed, the students scrambled away, some of them rushing up the slopes to leave the pit and surrender. Her jog was that terrifying. She would've liked to just teleport them back, to really instill the terror of facing an ancient beast.

Have I accidentally become some kind of demon lord? A foreign demon lord visiting the magical academy of Halstein?

'ding' Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 9

Oh come on! This is hardly worth mentioning compared to training with the Sentinels.

She heard a yelp as she threw an armored student to the side, followed by a loud 'oof' when he hit a tree. She checked to find his arm bruised but not broken.

I'm getting better at this…

Ilea thought it funny that throwing around these level one hundred fighters required almost as much finesse as dodging a four-mark's continued attacks. Perhaps this wouldn't be so useless after all.

She could tell Asren was itching to jump in, as were a few of the teachers, most of whom were close to or slightly above level two hundred. None did, however, for understandable reasons. Dignity first and foremost.

Ilea wouldn't be bound by such low standards. If a stronger person appeared, she'd happily get beaten up to learn about her limits. Even better if she didn't have to hold back at all.

Guess that's the Meadow for me.

"Thanks for training. Must be hard not to squash me," she sent to the creature as she caught the hood of a void mage.

They have such rare powers and yet so little experience.

"You're surprisingly durable. I only hold back ninety-nine percent," the Meadow sent back.

Liar. I know it's at least ninety-eight percent, she thought, throwing the mage over her shoulder.

Her slow approach wouldn't have worked on a large field, but the small pit allowed her to outmaneuver the students even at a jog.

Ilea caught another one a few seconds later, looking around to see the remaining fighters exhausted, bleeding, and out of mana. She lifted the woman up, watching her squirm.

Hmm. Maybe not exactly. I would catch them eventually at this speed, once they're exhausted or need sleep. Or, at worst, when they die of old age. I'm immortal, after all.

She smiled brightly as tears streamed down the girl's face.

"Please…"

"Aww." Ilea put her down, smiling when her precognition kicked in. She caught the girl's hand and broke her wrist, the metal spike she had concealed falling to the ground. "Good. Honor doesn't help when your survival depends on it. Use what you can."

She healed the girl and threw her aside, teleporting after the mage when she saw her flight angle. Ilea put a foot between the metal mage's chest and the ground, her knees slapping against the earth with two loud thuds.

"Careful now," she said, rolling her over with her boot. "If you land like that, you might break your neck."

The young woman whined, her perfect blonde hair and cute face absolutely ruined. "It… hurts…" she whispered.

"An astute observation," Ilea said, looking around to find no healthy students remaining in the pit.

The jog really broke their spirit. Maybe I should use less powerful attacks, like Absolute Destruction.

She walked over to a young man, coughing as he woke up. "You should get that waist guard checked out – a few straps came loose. Shouldn't happen from a throw like that."

He looked up at her and smiled forlornly. "Hardly matters now, does it?"

"Not against me, no. But your next battle may not be quite as hopeless," Ilea said and helped him up. "Seems like your friends abandoned you."

He sighed, waving off a group of three men sitting above the pit, their faces expressing varying degrees of apology. "I'll reevaluate my alliances," he said. "Do you want to be friends?"

Ilea raised an eyebrow. "I don't know you, kid."

The man shrugged. "Worth a shot. My mother always said that befriending powerful people is the key to influence."

"It's the key to resistances, that's for sure. Now fuck off, or I'll throw you again."

"Yes, ma'am," the student said and saluted, running away as fast as he could.

Good on you. I'd have caught you at a light jog.

"Nobody else want to join?" she asked, looking at the exhausted onlookers.

Asren appeared a few meters ahead of her. "I think that's enough for one afternoon," he said with obvious amusement. "Don't you think?"

"Sure you're not up for a brawl? Don't want to show off your mighty power to the impressionable student body?" Ilea said in a quiet tone.

"I believe Halstein has embarrassed itself quite enough for one day. Shall we?" he asked, gesturing upward.

"Sure, but I think that's enough of a tour for me. Thank you, Asren," Ilea said, spreading her wings as they both rose out of the pit and into the air.

"Can't say I expected to keep you here. What are your plans now?"

Ilea smiled. "I believe that's my business."

He chuckled. "Of course. I was merely curious what day-to-day business a person like you may have."

The two were soon hovering about sixty meters above the school grounds, and Asren looked down and breathed in deeply.

"To think what you could do to this place in mere seconds…"

"I'm not mad, Asren. I'm sure there are enough dangerous people in Kroll for you to worry about. And monsters," she added, remembering the whale creature that had flattened a large section of Ravenhall with a single spell. She wondered what the miniature sun spell would do to Halstein.

Best not think of those scenarios.

"I know you're not our enemy, Ilea," Asren said, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I bid you farewell, then. May our paths cross again in similarly favorable conditions."

"I hope so. Thanks again for the feast, it really was delicious."

* * *

Asren smiled. "Of course. We appreciate your assistance."

He felt the magic build within her wings before she shot off, and he lifted a hand to protect his face as a wave of air pushed him back. Ilea was already just a small dot to his eyes, vanishing entirely a few seconds later.

He sighed, cracking his neck as he flew down to inspect the damage to the students. He was glad she had restrained herself as much as she had, not

even injuring any of the fighters. Of course, he could already hear some people whining about unnecessary force and threats of talking to parents, uncles, or the King himself. Most of the students, however, seemed either awed, thoughtful, or downright hopeless. An improvement in Asren's eyes, compared to their previous overconfidence.

They can be as angry at her as they want. Nothing they do or say will mean anything to her. They learned their place in the world today, unmistakably.

And I won't hear the end of it. At least for a while.

He considered it a worthy sacrifice.

Back on the ground, Asren said a few encouraging words to the most downtrodden students before he rejoined the faculty. He knew the teachers well, their reactions both obvious and in character. The few who were both pragmatic and truly cared for their students' well-being seemed more than happy with the impromptu lesson.

Interesting. It seems some of you may have needed the reminder, too. Well, protected behind our walls from those we deem inhuman monsters, we do tend to forget about the dangers of the world.

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EIGHTEEN

Reputation

Ilea used her third-tier Transfer as soon as she had flown a few kilometers out of the city. About twenty seconds later, she appeared within the Meadow's lair.

"Hello," she called out to the enchanters, floating smith, and unspeakable horror tree.

"Your visits are frequent lately, human. Have you perhaps missed me?" the Meadow asked.

"Very much, my love. How are the children?" Ilea replied, looking around as she stretched.

Ah man, I love it here.

"I'm not sure what you're implying. But the children are all doing well."

She sat down and smiled. She felt good after her foray into Kroll and her experiences with both the Corinth Order and the students in Halstein. The Sentinels were on the right track, that much was certain.

Ilea smiled at the puzzle of floating stone in the shifting space before her. Iana was still working on her armor's enchantments, while Goliath was fiddling around with various materials from spatial containers in his new workshop.

I really wasn't gone for that long.

The Corinth Order likely wouldn't pose a threat again for the foreseeable future, and she had made an impression on the royals, including

people close to them. Not that she'd really had to try very hard. But surely none of it would backfire.

Training for the night, I suppose, and then the next Healing Order tomorrow. Let's hope they're a little more reasonable, or at least have poison capable of raising my resistance.

She sent a short message to Claire. *"Things went well in Halstein. Going to meet Balance tomorrow."*

Ilea breathed out and lost herself in her puzzle training and the flow-like focus of Space Awareness.

"The mists are retreating to the morning light," the Meadow said after a while.

Ilea looked up, blinking her eyes a few times as she stopped focusing on the space around her.

With her enhanced senses, coupled with Arcane Dominion and Space Awareness, the increasing variations and layers the Meadow conjured for her training let her sink into some sort of otherworldly space pocket. At the same time, her ability had increased to the extent that she knew that her mind was barely even scratching the surface.

Rationally, she knew how truly powerful the Meadow was, but it was simpler to think of higher-level magic users as just packing a harder punch. With her Space Awareness, however, she was learning to glimpse into the bottomless depths of the capabilities of magic.

'ding' Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 8

'ding' Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3
'ding' Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 7

"Thanks," she said, standing up and brushing some dirt from her ashen dress. It covered her up without her armor's insane defensive capabilities, allowing for more efficient resistance training without ruining clothes and armor. *"You're really quite terrifying,"* she added, looking at the tree as she cracked her neck and knuckles.

"You lack the perception to grasp my primal form," the Meadow said.

"Oh really? Are you creating an illusion to prevent everyone around you from going mad?" she joked.

"Yes."

Ilea blinked her eyes, unsure if the being was just fucking with her. Either answer seemed perfectly reasonable.

Maybe it's both.

She laughed at the idea of its presence alone literally killing her on the spot.

"Can you show me?"

"I won't undress in front of you," the Meadow said.

"Understandable." She activated her long-range teleportation. *"Might be back again later. Thanks for the training."*

"I'll be here."

Ilea appeared on a forested hill overlooking Riverwatch, looking up at the birds chirping away.

Didn't even notice me appear, hmm?

The sky was mostly clear, the morning light bathing the forested plains and the vast mountain of Karth. Carts and groups of adventurers were leaving the city below.

Claire had already been in touch with the Order of Balance. A certain Minister Genesis would await Ilea's arrival in the western section of Virilya. She assumed the person in question was important enough to be found rather easily.

Her flight path took her near the walls of Riverwatch. As she flew, Ilea glanced over the busy independent city, spotting a few flying mages and guards going about their business. Some of the guards on the walls waved her way, likely recognizing the familiar armor and wings.

They might just think that I'm a Sentinel.

The thought was comforting. She hadn't considered it so far, but the more Sentinels managed to get to a higher level, unlocking some kind of ashen armor and wings, the less recognizable she herself would become. Before, people had thought of her as just another Shadow, which, granted, she was. But now, with her reputation, pretty much everyone who heard the songs or stories could put two and two together.

Until my own reputation mixes with that of the Sentinels – Lilith the legendary founder who may or may not truly exist.

Ilea could even see how people would start to believe Lilith was more than one person, especially with her flying speed and long-range teleportation. The journey from Halstein to Virilya would take weeks for normal people, and probably a few days even for Hunter-rank Sentinels.

She charged her wings and focused on the mark she'd placed on Felicia, who was somewhere in the direction of Virilya. A moment later, she shot off into the distance.

None of the monsters or people she saw on the way reacted to her passing, most likely not even noticing anything until the sound reached them. Her high Wind Resistance ability reduced that effect as well, however.

Ilea slowed when she saw light glittering on the surface of the capital's lake, landing in the wilderness a few kilometers from its walls.

Been a while since I visited, she thought, remembering the empty streets and siege weapons between the Baralian invaders and the besieged Imperials. Back then, it had almost seemed like a stalemate. Now, she couldn't really think of a way that Baralia could have pushed through.

Calculated, probably. The Empire must have known about the political situation in Baralia and thought it more effective to wait out the siege. It must've taken some iron-willed commitment and control over the nobility to allow a one-year shutdown of the capital.

I wonder what the Empress is like. Maybe she's a secret three-mark? Or even higher?

Ilea ran the rest of the way, now wearing a set of casual clothes. She reached the city walls a few minutes later, the guards letting her pass immediately when she showed them her Emerald Adventurer badge.

"I'm looking for the closest Order of Balance temple," she said to one of the guards.

"Half an hour that way. Too many alleys, just ask on the way for specific directions," the woman said, pointing southward.

"Thanks."

As Ilea walked through the streets, she took in the sights. Some of the buildings sported people making repairs, while others were receiving a fresh coat of paint. There were beggars on the streets, but no more than at any other time she'd visited.

Hardly seems like there's been a war.

It had been a while since the siege, and Lys was likely the most powerful country in the Plains. They had thousands of mages to throw against any problem or infrastructure issue that cropped up.

And probably thousands more mages from Baralia now.

She continued on her way for a few minutes, healing anybody with injuries she saw within her dominion, distributing some silver to the beggars, and buying some street food.

Ilea soon found a temple of sorts, a line of people queuing outside. She could tell that everyone had a malady of one sort or another. Those she could heal, she did, likely robbing the temple of a significant part of their work – or their business – but she hardly cared.

“Is this the Order of Balance?” she asked an older gentleman sitting on a nearby bench in the shade of a tree.

“Hmm, yes. Indeed,” he said, looking at her. “Are you going to join?”

“I don’t plan to,” Ilea answered, glancing behind her when she saw something flicker at the edge of her dominion. She just managed to see the line of the teleportation spell.

Someone’s watching me? Well, we are in the capital. Probably one of the Lily’s goons, whichever member found me first. Or someone from the military?

She didn’t particularly care. Turning her head, she found a cloaked figure staring at her through a distant window. The man flinched and then vanished when she cocked her head to the side a little, staring right at him.

At that moment, a group of adventurers walked by, their body language somewhat tense and angled toward her. None of them made a move, however – they simply passed by and entered a nearby store.

“Is that her?” one of them whispered.

Ilea listened to the conversation, concentrating to focus on their subdued voices in the sea of noise.

“Can’t be… she looks too normal,” a woman said.

“Don’t let it fool you,” a third voice said. “She matches the description. We’ll keep an eye on her and inform the captain if she does anything suspicious. Don’t engage under any circumstances. You know what she can do.”

So much for anonymity. Maybe I should wear plate armor and carry my hammer. Next time, I guess, she thought as she entered the temple.

At the head of the line stood a healer wearing dark gray robes, a sheathed short sword hanging from her belt. She seemed a little confused as she checked the man in front of her with a healing spell. Some of the people in the queue were already leaving, thanking any nearby Order members for the help.

The woman looked around before her eyes fell on Ilea.

“Greetings,” Ilea said, waving as she ascended the stairs. Most of the temple’s interior was made of stone, simple and sturdy. She assumed few, if any, had been destroyed in the war.

The doors are super sturdy too, and enchanted.

“Greetings. I assume you’re responsible for this?” the healer asked, gesturing to the people leaving.

[Pure Healer – lvl 112]

“You think I just healed about sixty people?” Ilea asked.

The healer looked at her and nodded. “You’re quite a high-level healer. So yes. I ask you not to interfere with our business any further than this, though I suppose I can’t stop you.”

“I thought healers were supposed to heal?”

“They are. But I can’t heal fifty people in the span of a minute. It’s valuable experience, though, and I can earn some additional coin. Now, what can I do for you?”

Ilea considered the answer and found she didn’t really care. Healers would find work easily enough, even if she healed everyone in this city.

Maybe then a few more would actually join adventurer teams.

She thought about the prospect of covering the entirety of Virilya with her dominion and healing every person within it. The idea seemed both impractical and a bit of a waste of time. Maybe once the teleportation gates were ready, the Sentinels could do a sweep through large cities every few months.

That would probably piss off the Orders, though. And city governments. Ah, well.

“Are you still there?” the healer asked, still waiting for an answer to her question.

“Oh, sorry. I’m looking for Minister Genesis,” Ilea said, noticing a few glances her way when she said the name.

“Minister Genesis? What business do you have with her?” the healer asked, obviously a little suspicious. “If you want to join the Order, you can do that with Minister Veer. He’s in his office down the hallway.”

“That’s not why I’m here. I’m Lilith. I understand I’m expected.” She activated her Deviant aura briefly and spread her wings in the same

moment.

“Y… w… Ye…yes, let me… I’ll bring you to her… immediately. Apologies,” she fumbled, bowing. “I meant no offense, Lady Lilith.”

“Calm down. Just tell me where I can find her.”

“The main western temple, overlooking the lake. It’s really no issue. I can show you the way.”

“What’s in it for you?” Ilea asked. More healers had gathered around them, murmuring to each other.

“I… I’m an… admirer. It’s… an honor to meet you!” the woman finally pressed out. Her whole body language, coupled with the shade on her cheeks, had morphed her into an entirely new character.

“I see…” Ilea said. “Alright, then. Show me the way, I guess.”

She watched the woman outright squeal with glee as she walked down the stairs. “Is it true that you met General Ryse? And that you fought the monsters in Seyna? I heard you infiltrated the Order of Truth before they could cause even more damage to their own cities.”

“You’ve heard a lot of stories,” Ilea said, walking next to the woman as she led her westward through the city.

The healer smiled. “Everything I could find… Oh, I’m sorry… this must be kind of uncomfortable.” She laughed awkwardly. “I just… when I heard about the Medic Sentinel Corps… I was overjoyed!”

“You could always try to join,” Ilea suggested.

“I… I don’t think I can go through that kind of training. If the rumors are true. And I’m already in an Order. We’re not supposed to just switch. I’m Julia, by the way, I don’t think I’ve mentioned that yet. The training with the Order of Balance was exhausting enough. I don’t know if I could go through that again… and actually fight each other… and monsters… no. No, that’s not… not for me. I like the songs, though! And I love hearing the stories about you. Did you know that a few writers in the city have started to collect tales about you from front-line soldiers and adventurers?”

Dear god.

Julia bit her lip and looked at the ground. “Hmm. I suppose it’s impossible to tell if the stories are actually true. Not if you don’t confirm or deny them. But you’re probably very busy, so it wouldn’t make much sense. We have to go left here,” she babbled, leading them toward Virilya’s west wall. “It’s just outside, where the fishing port is. Did you really fight a demon horde right outside the southern gates?”

“I took part in a battle like that, yes,” Ilea said.

Julia squeaked, raising both of her hands to cover her mouth. “I *knew* that one was true! And then you rallied the Shadows in the city to go and retake Ravenhall, didn’t you?”

“I had information from Ravenhall, but it wasn’t me who rallied them,” Ilea said. She didn’t mind answering some of the excited woman’s questions if she actually led her to the Minister in the process.

Julia smiled knowingly. “No need for modesty, I know it was you. Either that or you pulled the strings from the shadows. The battle in Ravenhall must have been incredible. I heard there were tens of thousands of demons. Even creatures as tall as our walls are high!”

The scouts must’ve shared that story. Or some of the Shadows who took part. I suppose it’s understandable to take some credit after being part of that battle.

Ilea had simply experienced things now that entirely overshadowed the battle for Ravenhall. She certainly wouldn’t share those with the young woman next to her, who was already entirely overwhelmed by her presence. She checked her surroundings but only found two rogue types following them. There was no sign of Maro.

Don’t pass your cult curse onto me.

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NINETEEN

Balance

The temple was located outside the main city walls, nestled between hundreds of buildings squished onto the narrow strip of land between the massive walls and the lake. Plenty of buildings stretched over the water as well, stone pillars and wooden beams supporting the structures with dozens of piers in between.

The lakeside part of town narrowed toward the north until water touched the city walls. To the south, the space broadened instead, where a less impressive wall protected the packed town against monster attacks. Given how massive Virilya was, this portion outside its main walls could have been an entire settlement on its own, the walls comparable to those of Riverwatch.

Ilea watched as a few dozen fishing boats sailed onto the expansive lake, a few hundred in total visible from the stairwell she stood on.

“Have you not visited this part of town before?” Julia asked, waiting a few steps ahead.

“No,” Ilea answered. “I’ve only seen it from a distance. I’ve not stayed in the city for longer than a few days at a time.”

“Too busy fighting the enemies of humanity.”

I wonder what excuse she’d come up with for the elves.

Jutting out from the bustling fishing area, the temple looked more like a military fort than a religious center, with wooden houses built up against the stone walls of the Order structure.

“Why build this temple here instead of inside the walls?”

“For the view, I suppose,” Julia said with a shrug. “No way to see the lake from inside the city.”

How many people sign up for the guard just to stand on those walls, then? Ilea thought, turning around and looking up. Despite her ability to fly and everything she’d seen, it still seemed imposing. A testament to magic itself.

And yet a Trakorov could burst through them with a single charge. Probably.

She assumed there were dozens of enchantments placed on the walls, reinforcing them tenfold or even more. Perhaps it really was enough to stop a four-mark creature.

Ilea would certainly be interested in stress testing the walls of Virilya and Ravenhall, just to see who could do better. She couldn’t see a way for either to stop her Archon Strike coupled with an ashen drill, but there was a chance she’d be surprised.

I could ask Claire about that. She may be interested too.

The ‘fort’ itself had a large wooden gate, which was currently open, with two imperial guards standing out front. A stone courtyard opened up within, where dozens of people were talking to the healers, some negotiating and moving on to others.

“Like a market for medicine,” Ilea said.

Julia glanced back and smiled. “I suppose it is. And a lot of that money goes back into training new healers or building temples in less wealthy towns all over the Empire and bordering countries.”

“You’re present in all of them?”

“Most, though mainly the Empire. I suppose our influence here prevents rapid expansion elsewhere. Considering the close relationship with Lys.”

Ilea nodded along, returning the greetings a few healers gave her. Most were below level one hundred, and none gave the impression of an experienced fighter. But she supposed that was the point.

They went up a few sets of stairs into the upper part of the fort, where more imperial guards now actively stopped them from going further.

“Healing doesn’t pay enough to hire your own guards?” Ilea smirked at Julia.

“You come here to insult the Order? Do we have a problem?” one of the guards said, gripping his weapon.

Julia went stock still and glared at the man. “You’re insulting Lilith – watch your mouth,” she said with a low growl.

He glanced between them, clearly caught off guard by the small woman’s fervor.

“Apologize to her,” Julia demanded hotly.

Ilea waved her off. “It’s fine. I was being rude.” She looked at the guardsmen. “So why don’t they have their own guards?”

“The Order pays plenty of taxes. And healers can’t exactly protect themselves, can they?”

Really?

[Halberd Fighter – lvl 85]

“I guess they can’t,” Ilea said, blinking a few times as she looked at the man. “Good thing they have you to protect them.”

“Yeah, yeah. Now go on inside, will you?” He spat on the ground. “Nobility.”

“I’m not actually noble, but sure. A good day to you two,” Ilea said, then displaced their weapons onto the roof.

“Wha… where…?” one of them stuttered, looking around in confusion.

“I think I heard something on the roof,” Ilea said.

Julia giggled next to her. “Shall we?”

She looked ready to fight that man with her bare hands, Ilea thought.

“I think I can find the way myself now. Thanks for getting me here, Julia.”

“Oh… alright. Well, good luck in that case. I hope to hear more about your… oh… before… do you maybe want to get lunch later? I know a few good restaurants!” the woman asked, her face now a deep shade of red.

Ilea smiled. “That’s sweet, but I’ve got other business to attend to afterward. Thanks for the invitation, and good luck with your healing.”

The woman nodded, deflating a little before she straightened and smiled. “Goodbye, Lilith. It was an honor to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, Julia,” Ilea answered. Then she entered the temple.

Well, that was awkward. She hadn’t wanted to take advantage of the starstruck healer and certainly hoped this wouldn’t become a normal occurrence. *Go Sentinels, get stronger quickly.*

The halls within were mostly empty, with only one healer walking past but ignoring Ilea after giving her a confused glance. Using her dominion, Ilea soon found a woman sitting at a desk in the largest room, with windows facing onto the lake beyond. She assumed this was the Minister.

Let's see what she's about. And what I can expect from the Order of Balance.

Claire hadn't assumed there would be a lot of issues, yet the very recent meeting with the Corinth Order had Ilea feeling a little bit on edge.

She knocked on the door, making the woman look up. "Yes?"

Ilea looked in through the half-opened door. "Minister Genesis?"

"Indeed." The woman locked eyes with her. "And you must be Lilith. Come in."

Ilea closed the door behind her and looked around. A few shelves lined the walls, covered not only with books but also trinkets, potions, and other items giving off various magical auras. A large brown pelt from some kind of bear lay on one side of the room, where a door led out to a terrace overlooking the port.

[Barrier Mage – lvl 285]

The woman looked to be in her fifties, but she could've been hundreds, if not thousands, of years old. Her gray hair was bound in a single bun, and she wore a slightly armored dark gray robe with silver embroidery.

Based on her limited armor, high level, and body language, Ilea assumed that the Minister had at least some real battle experience. Her face was schooled, but the slight tension in her body suggested apprehension.

She should be able to tell I'm a three-mark. Not that she seems particularly bothered. That's kind of nice.

"Lovely office you have here," Ilea commented, breaking eye contact to look outside. "And an even better view."

The Minister smiled. "The lengths I went to for this view…" she said, shaking her head. "I'm glad you could make it. Claire informed us that you were coming, I just didn't expect you so early."

She gestured to a comfortable-looking chair in front of her large wooden desk.

Ilea accepted the invitation. "I'm sure neither of us needs a lot of sleep anymore."

“And yet it’s still such a wonderful thing, isn’t it? If only there were less work and more competent people to assign it to,” the woman said. “I also heard about your plans to visit Halstein. Perhaps it’s too late, but I should warn you about the Corinth Order. Their reputation and current state suggest motives that may endanger both you and your allies.”

“I appreciate the warning,” Ilea said. “But that’s already been dealt with.”

If the woman knew about her planned visit, she would surely be informed of what happened in Halstein within the week.

The Minister blinked and nodded lightly. “I can pay for any information you’re willing to share on that subject.”

“I’ll let Claire decide exactly what my information is worth, if you’re willing to accept that trade?”

Since the Order of Balance wanted to make gold from healing, Ilea would just deflect their attacks toward her most efficient shield and weapon. Claire Russel.

The woman smiled and leaned back. “Tea?” she asked, summoning a teapot.

“Gladly,” Ilea said.

Two cups appeared on the desk, and the woman filled them with meticulous care. “Brewed perfectly. Curious how some storage items manage to preserve such things.”

“It’s a great benefit,” Ilea said, using some ash to move her cup toward her.

Maybe one day I’ll be able to understand what’s happening within them.

“I can assume, then, that any discussion of specifics will be left to your southern ally?”

“Depends on what specifics exactly,” Ilea answered. “She doesn’t speak for me, and I don’t speak for her. But if you mean politics, treaties, assets, and trade, then yes.”

“I understand. I’ll have to find time for a visit, then. To talk both to her and to the Headmaster of your Sentinels. Can I also assume that your announcement to focus on adventuring teams and hunting monsters is sincere?”

So she’s worried about competition.

“We don’t train healers to stay behind walls, but I can’t speak for all the Sentinels. For now, I think they would all prefer to hone their skills in the

wilderness, but they'll likely heal people during their travels."

Minister Genesis nodded slightly.

"Your name is curious. How should I address you?" Ilea asked.

"Genesis is perfectly fine. Is Lady Lilith acceptable to you?"

"Just Lilith is fine."

"Lilith, then. I'm glad to hear it from you personally. I don't believe there will be any major issues between our Order and your organization. And should any arise, I'm sure we can find non-violent ways to solve them."

That's it? Well, sure. That sounds reasonable.

And she's worried about violence. It's not like we're trying to replace any Healing Orders or remove them from the world.

Though I guess it depends. If they're as corrupt as the Corinth Order or the Order of Truth, I think setting up some Sentinel facilities outside Ravenhall shouldn't be out of the question.

"I'm sure we can," Ilea said. "Though I would take issue if your Order hunts unaffiliated healers. Or lets people die because they can't pay for your services."

It was a low bar, she thought. But she wanted to hear what Genesis had to say.

The Minister looked at her. "Curious. I hadn't thought you a humanitarian. No member of the Order of Balance can speak for all the healers trained by us or associated with us. There has surely been death and suffering caused by those refusing services, though most people who choose to become healers don't do so for monetary gain alone. Internal rules forbid such actions, but it's impossible to monitor everyone at all times."

She paused to take a sip of tea. "But I understand you've been to Baralia and seen the blood rituals conducted there. While we can't make sure there are no healers overstepping any boundaries or refusing services without due cause, we are no savages. I assume you understand that difference."

"Of course."

They both looked at each other for a long moment.

Seems like we're mostly on the same page, then. Refreshing after all that drama.

"So, it seems like our organizations should be able to coexist," Ilea said.

“It seems like that will be the case,” Genesis said. “Before you leave, I accept the terms you mentioned. Whatever information you have on the Corinth Order, I would like to hear it. And we will compensate your organization in turn. Or Ravenhall itself, if that is your wish.”

Ilea waved her off. “Just mention it to Claire.”

With that, she quickly outlined what had happened in Kroll.

“The Speaker… is dead,” Genesis said slowly. “That may change things if Donnavon and Mateo are now in a position to make decisions. I only have a little information on Bryce, but if what you say of him is true, this could be incredibly beneficial. Thank you.”

“Beneficial for whom?”

“Everyone. Though, admittedly, we shall benefit greatly. I suppose your own organization will too, but this is the fruit of your labor, after all.”

Ilea nodded. “I was wondering, I’ve not seen your temples in the western cities.”

“Riverwatch prefers to train its own healers, though not for the benefit of the population. Perhaps we can come to better arrangements now that they’re so closely connected to an independent Ravenhall. Dawntree won’t accept another Healing Order within its walls for a generation or two, and Stormbreach… has its own ‘Order’.”

It certainly does.

Ilea thought about her early days here in Elos. There had been few healers, if any, in the adventuring teams she’d met. In the west, sure, it may have been due to the influence of the Corinth Order, but it wasn’t all that different in Lys, as far as she could tell.

“I was wondering why there aren’t more adventuring healers if you don’t actively prevent yours from joining any teams.”

“Convenience, mostly. Healers who join our Order have to work within our temples for many years. Lucrative positions, mind you. Most find it difficult to let go of the prestige and comforts that come with being a healer,” Genesis said, gesturing around her to underline the point. “And those who don’t either die in one dungeon or another, join the guard or the military, or return after seeing a little too much violence and death.

“I admire your wish to support adventurers with capable healers and to train healers who can hold their own in the first place. But I can’t imagine the amount of gold you’ve invested in this endeavor. I hope it doesn’t turn out to be a massive failure.”

Gold? Ah, I see. She's not thinking about making money, just the economics of running an organization like that. Am I that rich? Is Claire that rich?

Or it's just a consideration of the risks involved. Training healers who might die out there is definitely riskier than training them and having them stay safe.

"We'll find out, I suppose," Ilea said. "But whatever happens, I'm already more than happy with the Sentinels."

"Then that is good to hear."

"Is there anything else we should discuss?"

"I would like to discuss potential treaties and specific agreements on cooperation, but I assume that is something I will have to do with your associates?"

"Yes." Ilea finished her tea and smiled as she stood up. "It was good to meet you, Minister Genesis."

"Likewise, Lady Lilith."

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TWENTY

Acquaintances

Ilea left the temple with a smile. The tea really had been quite excellent. She had received a perfectly brewed potful as a farewell gift, though only after she had proven her own storage item could keep it at the required temperature without oversteeping. One of Keyla's meals had convinced the Minister. A steep price, but perhaps a fair trade for a creation by her best chef.

That went well. If she didn't outright lie about anything, then the Sentinels shouldn't have any issues operating in and around Lys. And there shouldn't be any external pressure from Balance either. But I guess we'll see.

She stretched her neck and back, then sighed.

What now, then? I'm done with my mission.

Hmm. I am in the capital.

* * *

"In Virilya. Do you have time for a visit?" Ilea sent to Felicia as she stepped out of the temple complex into the large port district.

Ilea felt a bit giddy, knowing how quickly she could visit with her teleportation anchor near Riverwatch.

“For you, always. Will need a few hours. Redleaf Estate,” Felicia replied.

Does that mean I should go there in a few hours? Or now? Ilea wondered. *Well, I’m not only here for her. Might as well have a look at the house they took back from Arthur.*

She summoned a silver coin and gave it to a nearby beggar. “Any clue where the Redleaf Estate is?”

“Thank you. Very generous, Miss Healer. Redleafs… hmm… eastern part within the walls, I’d say. Don’t know specifics. Apologies, miss.”

“Thanks.”

Ilea headed back through the large gate and into the city proper, where she teleported to the top of the largest building nearby, holding on to a spire with an extended wing. The mark on Felicia suggested she was in Virilya’s central district.

Not where I want to be, Ilea thought and jumped off again, using her wings to avoid damaging the street. *My weight is becoming a bit of an issue, at least in these parts.*

Compared to smaller towns and villages, it seemed displays like that weren’t exactly unheard of. Most of the passersby went on with their business immediately after making sure there was no actual danger to their lives. She still had her tails, though – and there were more now than before.

“Leave me alone,” she murmured, whistling with Monster Hunter before she vanished, teleporting a few dozen times and finally reemerging in a busy side street. Her eyes closed as her nose took in some delicious fragrances intermingling with the usual city smells.

Jackpot.

A few copper pieces lighter, and several thousand calories richer, she continued on her wandering way through the sprawling capital.

Street performers sang and juggled, their tricks made more impressive by their practiced use of martial skills and magic spells. Bards strummed various instruments, both advertising nearby shops and simply entertaining passersby.

When Ilea walked into a leatherworking store, a jingle above the door announced her entrance. She quickly chose a set of light armor made of dark brown leather lined with thin plates of dull steel. She added a cloak and went to the broad counter at the back.

“That’ll be one gold and fifty-eight silver,” the man said after inspecting the wares. “Will you need a pack to carry it all?”

Ilea summoned the coins and made the armor vanish, changing her outfit in the blink of an eye before she pulled the light brown cloak over her head.

The leatherworker grinned and gave her a slight nod. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

With nobody else in the store, Ilea summoned a few more pieces of silver and placed them on the counter. “Can you tell me where the Redleaf Estate is located?”

“About two hours’ walk east, I believe. Close to the main eastern road. Between the glassworking and eastern alchemy districts. They have more than one estate, but I believe their main one was there. Don’t count on them being around, though. I believe the head of their House passed away some time ago.”

“Thank you. Can I count on your discretion?” she asked, pushing the silver toward him.

“Certainly. We never met.”

* * *

Ilea tried some dishes on the way, remaining vigilant of the folks within her dominion all the while. She didn’t really mind having a few people tailing her, but bringing them to Felicia might be a nuisance for her.

In the end, her new outfit, coupled with a certain amount of caution, prevented any more people from recognizing her. High-level healers in Virilya probably weren’t that uncommon, given the presence of the Order of Balance.

She found the districts the leatherworker had mentioned about an hour later, occasionally teleporting to nearby roofs to get a better idea of exactly where she was. Most of the people she asked for more specific directions were rather helpful.

Normalcy has definitely returned.

Eventually, Ilea entered a rather broad street, wide enough for a carriage to turn comfortably, lined with luscious trees. At the end of the road stood a mansion, parts of it covered in ivy, with a tree growing off to the right, a few of its branches resting on the tiled roof. A gated fence prevented

outsiders from entering without climbing, teleporting, or flying, while large bushes behind formed a natural wall. All of it seemed somewhat abandoned and decrepit.

Based on the directions she'd been given, however, Ilea was pretty sure this was the place. *Must've looked impressive before the war. When Arthur was still around. I wouldn't be surprised if Felicia has deliberately let this place crumble.*

There was no way to inform anybody inside of her arrival, nor would anyone be able to see her waiting outside, so she simply jumped over the fence, landing in the stone courtyard, where grass and weeds had started growing through the cracks. Ilea winced when she heard the loud impact, looking down to find fresh cracks beneath her feet.

Shouldn't have jumped that high.

The door to the manor burst open a moment later, and a familiar figure walked out, magic flowing around her.

"I thought we were done with— Ilea?" Aliana asked. The woman's brown hair was short and well-kept, and she was wearing an apron over a set of gray and red armor. It looked custom-made and unlike anything Ilea had seen the Lys military use before.

"Yes – hi there," Ilea said with a wave.

Aliana rushed over and caught her in a hug. "It's good to see you! It's been too long." She let go of her and smiled, then glanced down.

"Sorry about the floor."

"Wait, so that *was* you?"

"I've put on a bit of weight," Ilea answered with a smile.

The woman grinned. "Wonderful. It's good that you're getting fed properly! Now, don't just stand there – come in! I'm preparing lunch. And you're invited."

"Thank you," Ilea said. "I assume you were cooking for Felicia? She knows I'm in the city."

"Am I not allowed to prepare lunch for myself?" Aliana asked, leading Ilea into the ancient manor.

Many of the windows were open, and flowers and plants filled the empty spaces where it seemed paintings would've hung at some point. Ilea could still see a bunch of nails in the walls. She thought it was charming; the fresh vegetation took away some of the weight the dark wood had on the atmosphere. ,

“Of course you are. It’s been a while, Aliana. How have you been?”

[Water Mage – lvl 208]

She remembered the time Aliana had almost burned her to death with her steaming water. Great memories.

“Simply wonderful, Ilea. Do you want to wait in the banquet hall or join me in the kitchens?” she asked. “It’s been a while since we had a guest I actually cared about.”

“I’ll join you. But I haven’t really worked on my ability to cook since we last met,” Ilea admitted. “You get a lot of guests here?”

“I never took you for a cook. Someone who can appreciate the value of food, however, that you are. And I always appreciated that,” she said, leading Ilea into an extensive area in the back of the manor.

Whatever this room had been before was long forgotten; now, everything was covered with enchanted cooking equipment. Ovens, heating plates, and storage containers lined the back wall, and sunlight streamed in through several large windows. Beyond, Ilea could see a lush garden with flowers, herbs, and trees, giving the impression they were in a country village instead of a bustling capital city. The whole district was rather quiet, adding to the serene atmosphere.

Dozens of hooks lined the walls above the windows, pans and pots hanging from them with the occasional knife sticking out of the wood itself. Crates littered the hardwood floor, a pile of bones sat in a steel tub to the side, and meat hooks, currently empty, hung from above.

Aliana checked a few pots, lifting lids and stirring their contents, filling the room with the fragrance of various vegetables and herbs. Turning around, she rested her behind on a nearby cabinet. “Not a lot of guests here. For good reason,” she said and gestured to the general state of everything. “Felicia meets notable contacts in another mansion, not previously associated with the Redleaf family and quite a bit more… modest. She returns here in her free time, but that hasn’t been a lot, I’m afraid.”

Ilea nodded, grabbing a nearby chair and carefully sitting down. The wood creaked a little but held. Aliana raised an eyebrow. “So this is where the political prisoners end up?” Ilea asked to distract her, nodding to the meat hooks.

The woman laughed. “Oh, not at all. She’s not her father, after all,” she smiled. “No, Edwin and his… ‘pupil’ often bring back one carcass or another. At my request, of course.”

“I thought he was… drinking? A lot, I mean,” Ilea said. “And he has a pupil now?”

“Oh, he is. And well… yes and no. It’s a little complicated.”

Ilea shrugged, smiling as she rested her elbows on the back of the chair. “Tell me all about it. I’m sure we have the time – you haven’t even started cooking the meat yet. High time we caught up on things.”

Aliana rolled her eyes. “I’ve learned plenty about you from Felicia and the songs. Lilith, savior of Riverwatch, member of the Lily. And you fought alongside Velamyr Ryse, even Michael Elyse. Quite an impressive change compared to your adventures in Taleen dungeons, working with a young Redleaf noble and helping him in his plots.”

“It was quite helpful. Any issues I had with him are long forgotten now,” Ilea said. “And don’t believe the songs and stories. I’m the same woman I was back then. Mostly.”

“That’s good to hear. You might even see him if you stay long enough. I have no idea when they’ll come back, but it’s been three days already. I can’t say I’ve stayed exactly the same. Taking care of him, I think, has changed me, as have the classes I’ve been participating in.”

“Classes?”

Aliana waved her off. “Ah, various things. Felicia thinks it paramount that I learn to express myself in different languages, understand the political intricacies of the city and the Empire, and manage trade and various other things a high noble should know. It’s interesting, don’t get me wrong, but this”—she gestured around herself—“this is where I love to be.”

“She cares about you,” Ilea said. “You could tell her, you know? If you don’t feel like taking on those responsibilities or learning about topics you’re not necessarily passionate about.”

“I’ll be by her side for as long as I live, Ilea. And if I can improve my value to her, I will. I know she would let me go the moment I asked her, and that’s precisely why I’m staying. She’s not just a friend to me, she’s my sister.”

“I can tell,” Ilea said with a smile. “So Edwin is your brother?”

The expression on Aliana’s face changed; she looked tired before she forced a perfect smile. “It’s good, right? Can you believe I took a class just

for that?”

“It’s quite scary,” Ilea said.

“Schooling one’s face is apparently very important because in politics, everything you give away can and will be used against you. It’s tiring, let me tell you. But necessary. As for your question, no. I respect the drive Edwin once possessed. He’s one of the main reasons Felicia and I are where we are now. Arthur is dead because of his efforts. Your help and ours definitely played a part, but he’d been at it for years and years. We would’ve been lost without him, and I’ll never forget that.

“But since our return… well… he’s become irresponsible. He doesn’t have much drive, which I suppose makes sense. He’s started drinking, and he’s reckless. Well, he might’ve been reckless all this time, but before, he had a good reason, whereas now, he only creates more issues,” she said with a sigh. “It’s been difficult to deal with him. And while Felicia was busy trying to establish herself as the new head of the House, I dealt with him.”

“That does sound rough. Sorry you had to go through that,” Ilea said.

“Don’t mention it. It’s nothing compared to the time before all this. Or back in Baralia. I don’t want to complain too much, it’s just… you feel so familiar. In a way that most people I meet here just don’t.”

“I get what you mean. Maybe you should visit Ravenhall. I think you’d like the Shadows.”

“It’s way too far away.”

I’m working on that.

“So, Edwin is going on adventures?”

“He is,” Aliana said. “I worry about him, but it would have been worse for him to stay here and rot away. You know how tough he is. The jobs nearby shouldn’t be too dangerous for him. Not very lucrative either for someone at his level, but power and gold aren’t what he’s looking for. I’m not sure what he *is* looking for, though.”

“And… a pupil, you said?”

“Yes. I thought you were an intruder before… There have been many. It’s only natural, given the state this manor is in. It’s gotten a little better, but with the war and all that, the occasional opportunist or thief has found their way into our yard. Jyraiu was one of them. A performer from the west who failed to get work here.”

Jyraiu. Have I heard that name before?

“Edwin killed a few intruders when he got to them before I could or when I wasn’t here. That one, for some reason, he spared. He talked some nonsense about training the man and going on adventures. I really have no idea why he got that idea into his mind. But here we were.

“Jyraiu was obviously terrified, lying through his teeth, but I thought it was a good opportunity. Edwin could go out, maybe clear his head a little, and, who knows, actually do something for the world other than consume expensive liquor. It’s lucky Felicia owns a few distilleries.”

“So the guy’s still here because Edwin threatens him?” Ilea asked, a little confused by the story.

Aliana shook her head. “Not anymore. At first, sure. But he’s grown fond of Edwin. It’s either that or the fair pay he receives. Plus whatever they manage to get from the jobs they finish. Though that isn’t as much as you’d think. They’re either terrible or get very unlucky quests.”

“Sounds like an adventurer thing to do,” Ilea mused. “Where did you say he was from? Jyraiu, I mean. The name rings a bell.”

“He’s a Pyro Enhancer from the western cities. Apparently, he did fire magic shows. I saw some of his skills a few months back in our yard. We’d all drunk a little too much, but it was quite beautiful. Some guards interrupted the display, but he certainly knows what he’s doing, even when he’s that drunk.”

“Pyro Enhancer… Ah, the fire wings guy!” Ilea exclaimed. “From the Riverwatch tournament. Ah, that didn’t go well in the end, but I guess he made it out.”

“Fire wings?”

Ilea smiled. “Yeah, he inspired me to get a fire magic Class. I do have wings now, but I suppose they’re a little less flashy.”

“But a hundred times more recognizable, ash demon Lilith,” Aliana said in a teasing voice. “Now, has your appetite grown just as much as your power?”

Ilea grinned and leaned forward, catching herself when two of the chair’s wooden legs splintered. She displaced the chair away from her, sighing. “Exponentially so,” she said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to break the chair.”

“Wonderful. And don’t worry about the chair. Just don’t punch anyone, I don’t want to clean up again,” Aliana said, putting a few skillets onto

heated plates before she summoned a bottle of oil, whistling a tune all the while.

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TWENTY-ONE

Banquet

Jyraiu tried to get some distance between himself and Edwin. Even after all the time they'd worked together, Edwin still didn't spare a single thought for appearances.

And nobody even knows he's a member of the Redleafs.

Aliana's offer had seemed too good to be true. Jyraiu knew plenty about shady jobs, both as a performer and as an occasional adventurer. It wasn't like he'd really had a choice, either. Aliana might've let him go, in hindsight. Edwin, however, he wasn't so sure about.

Now he understood why the woman had hired him.

She's just as unknown to the public as he is at this point, he thought, glancing at the mud- and blood-covered man walking a few meters to his right, a bottle at his mouth and his eyes closed.

He had made inquiries, but Jyraiu hardly had any meaningful contacts in the capital, or Lys at large. Edwin was known but generally considered exiled, dead, or missing. The circumstances of any of those assumptions varied widely.

"Those Mudward were hardly worth the silver," Edwin muttered, glaring at a guard walking past.

"They did manage to injure you, and they nearly killed me," Jyraiu said, sighing as he looked at his hands. How many times had he jumped into danger now? He was a mundane adventurer, just like so many others. He

had to bide his time. Compared to thousands of others, he had an incredible opportunity on his hands.

“Ah fuck off, you just didn’t want to get dirty,” Edwin said. “How can you focus on something that stupid while fighting creatures close to your own level? You’ll never reach the two hundreds if you keep your priorities like that.”

That’s not the goal, now is it? Besides, I’ll get there in time. There’s no reason to rush anything, Jyraiu thought, ignoring the man.

Edwin threw the empty bottle aside, causing it to shatter against a nearby wall.

“Apologies,” Jyraiu said to the nearby citizens.

“You should’ve seen the Taleen Guardians I fought,” Edwin continued. “Now those were monsters. They would’ve sliced you up like a pig ready for slaughter.”

And there he goes again with his stories, Jyraiu thought, suppressing a sigh.

Edwin was tipsy right now, yet even whilst drunk, he was more perceptive than most people walking the streets of Virilya. If he wanted to talk about monsters, perhaps he should be looking at himself. A level two hundred sword master with body enhancement and blood magic. There were hardly any combinations Jyraiu could think of that were more deadly. Only nobility and the military could reliably obtain specialized Classes like that.

“You should’ve seen how Maria and Ilea fought. It’s not a surprise they’re both feared all across the Plains,” the noble added with a grin.

‘And I was the one to train them! They would be nowhere without my help! Dead in a dungeon, I say!’ Jyraiu thought, having heard the same tale at least fifty times before. But he couldn’t be too annoyed. Today, Edwin had actually tried to teach him again. And he’d intervened much earlier than he had just a few months back.

“We should clean up before we arrive,” Jyraiu said, trying to interrupt the ceaseless reminiscing. Maria was supposedly some famed assassin feared even by high-profile nobility in the capital. He could perhaps believe that much based on the status of Edwin’s House, but Ilea? Apparently she was Lilith, the Ashen Shadow. The ramblings of a drunkard with illusions of grandeur. He pitied him, he really did. And he disliked him, too. Yet he was still here, trying to get him back on some kind of path.

Guess it's just kind of tragic. I've certainly been a performer in the dumps before. At least the pay is pretty good.

Edwin waved him off. "Aliana's magic hardly gets any use these days. You should've seen her boil those slavers."

Jyraiu sincerely hoped that story was made up. Edwin didn't talk about the water mage much. In all his stories, only Felicia was mentioned less. And when he did speak of his sister, it was only in moments of lucidity. Those weren't good for anything in the vicinity.

Jyraiu had seen plenty of people with furious tempers, but Edwin had something much more powerful within him, yet there was nowhere for him to direct it.

It concerns his father, he thought, sure of his conclusion but unable to prove it. Arthur Redleaf had died – killed by his own daughter, some said. Killed by mercenaries, others claimed. Lost in a Taleen dungeon, still others whispered. It was more difficult to get reliable information in this city than it was to get a pay raise from a tournament organizer after signing a contract.

He followed the noble, as he ought to do. At least Aliana would refrain from drenching him as well if he stood far enough away from Edwin when they arrived. *If* he managed to stay somewhat clean.

The two soon arrived at the mansion, which still looked pretty much the same as when he had first broken in.

A year ago? He sighed. *What am I even doing here?*

He had been at his lowest point then. To think that Jyraiu of the West would stoop so low as to break into a mansion. He shook his head and followed Edwin through the iron grates, making enough noise to notify Aliana. She would be cooking at this time, and he wouldn't risk Edwin walking inside with all this mud on him.

Aliana opened the door a moment later, squinting at Edwin.

Jyraiu graciously stepped aside as a torrent of water slammed into the warrior. He did wonder why Edwin never teleported out of those. Perhaps he really meant what he said about her magic.

"Welcome home," Aliana said, looking at both of them. "I'll expect you to take a bath as well."

"Of course, ma'am," Jyraiu said and bowed with as much grace as he could summon.

She didn't seem impressed.

It annoyed him.

She simply lacks the required education to appreciate a Dawntree art school bow. Don't let it get to you.

Edwin vanished into the mansion, likely searching for the liquor Aliana had hopefully set out for him.

"Any issues?" Aliana asked.

Jyraiu walked closer, though he kept enough distance to make sure his scent wouldn't summon another torrent. "No. He told more stories. He intervened when I was close to getting injured, showed me a few evasive maneuvers, and explained my failure in using the terrain to my advantage." He produced a small booklet. "Sixteen bottles. And he ate three times, from the stew I made. I didn't even add liquor to the third portion."

The woman nodded lightly. "Good. Thanks for the report. And your diligence. Are you staying for lunch?"

How could anyone refuse her cooking?

"Gladly, Miss Aliana. I'll inform you about the next job later today."

"He seemed to be doing alright. I think a break of a day or two is acceptable."

Jyraiu blinked. *In a good mood today?*

His working conditions weren't exactly high standard, and he could leave whenever he liked. But he wouldn't be employed again by the Redleafs if he did. Although, after all this time, he wasn't sure if that was really true. Still, he wouldn't push his luck.

The adventuring with Edwin wasn't half bad anyway. He could work on performance ideas, songs, poems, and other musings while they traveled. The fighting itself was a mere fraction of what most weeks looked like. More than enough by his standards.

"Thank you. I'll go take that bath, then."

"Oh, we'll have a guest eating with us today. She's heard of you, apparently," Aliana said before she walked back inside to her slaughter hall.

She didn't even complain about the lack of kills we brought in.

Jyraiu found himself intrigued by the idea of a guest visiting this mansion. Few ever came here, only those closely trusted. Which also meant that he had to present his very best. Those close to the Redleafs' inner circle were highly influential themselves.

And she knows me? Someone with a sense of taste. Marvelous.

* * *

Jyraiu heated the water precisely to his preferred temperature and bathed thoroughly, washing away the stench of travel and battle clinging to his very essence.

Back in his comfortably large room, he chose a set of fine clothes loaned to him by the very House he worked for. They had lots of clothes and only Edwin to wear them. The man preferred his run-down set of armor. Only a House like the Redleafs could afford to pay for smiths to maintain that absurdity.

Jyraiu looked at himself in the slightly cracked mirror and smirked. *A little rugged*, he thought, touching the short beard he had grown. It suited him. But then again, what didn't?

Ready to impress, he went to the dining hall. It seemed at least somewhat orderly. Edwin was nowhere to be seen, but he usually went out after they came back, on whatever business a level two hundred noble blood mage went about in the capital of the fucking Empire.

Aliana was setting out various dishes on the long banquet table, enough food to feed an entire band of starving adventurers. Nothing new there.

What was new, however, was the woman piling food onto the plate in front of her, a grin on her face that rivaled that of a monster. She was so entirely absorbed in her lunch that she didn't react to his arrival in the slightest.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

A battle healer. With black hair and blue eyes.

No.

He simply refused the idea, sitting down on a chair opposite the woman. He grabbed a plate himself and relaxed.

"Enjoy the food," he said. "She's a wonderful cook."

"Spare me your flattery," Aliana said.

He ground his teeth a little, glancing at her before he found himself staring into two cold blue eyes. He gulped, the hand going for his fork suddenly unable to move. Something felt wrong. He shook the feeling and smiled, focusing on his food again.

“I will. And I know,” the black-haired woman said, starting to eat. “You’re Jyraiu. I remember you being more… fiery.”

He couldn’t help but smile. “You’ve enjoyed one of my performances?”

“In Riverwatch. Years ago. I really liked your wings,” the woman said with a grin.

Is she interested in me? No. She’s interested in my magic.

“I appreciate the compliment.”

The woman smiled. “I’m being rude. It’s nice to formally meet you, Jyraiu. My name is Ilea, and I too have wings,” she said as two large appendages made entirely of ash manifested on her back. Their form looked smooth and durable, nothing like what the few ash mages he had met could conjure up.

He gulped. “Edwin has… mentioned you.” He couldn’t stop himself. “Is it true that you’re… Lilith?”

The woman cocked her head to the side a little. “Use Identify.”

[Battle Healer – lvl ???]

“What…” Jyraiu breathed out. He knew that she could smell his fear.

She can even read your mind, he thought, trying to get himself back under control. *Three marks. Three marks.*

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

What…? No. I didn’t imagine that. I refuse. An illusion? She’s eating as if nothing has happened. Acting like her status isn’t worth mentioning.

“I told her about your adventures. And how you got the job,” Aliana said.

He gulped.

“Must’ve been pretty shit to lose the western cities,” Ilea said. “How did you escape when the elves attacked?”

How does she know about that? Is she testing me?

He wished he was back in Riverwatch, facing down the monstrous smiles of ancient elves, just to escape this conversation.

* * *

To think I'm scaring this guy shitless. The same man who seemed like a god of fire to me just a few years ago. What a truly magical place this is.

"Ilea!" Edwin exclaimed happily as he joined them, holding out both arms, a bottle in each hand.

"Edwin. I won't hug you if that's what you're suggesting you want," Ilea said, going back to her food.

He waved her off and set down his bottles, slapping Jyraiu on the back as he sat down next to the man.

"See? Told you I knew her. Who's the drunk idiot now?" he asked before he downed one bottle over the next fifteen seconds of silence.

"I heard you're an adventurer now," Ilea said, working through her third plate. Aliana was a good cook. She wouldn't dare compare her creations to those of Keyla. The battle would be horrific.

"Moving up in the world. Hunted noble, murderer, and now adventurer," Edwin said. "You're moving up, too. Naïve opportunist, Shadow, and now… what, some kind of ashen god?" He laughed, coughing a few times.

Ilea displaced a plate of food in front of him. "Wouldn't want to offend the cook, now would we?"

The man looked at her and frowned. Then he shrugged and started eating. "So, what's true? You do seem like you could kill everyone in this room with a snap of your fingers. I can feel the danger from you… It's like nothing I've ever seen before."

"What more do you need to know?" Ilea asked, returning to her food.

"Ah. You see this fellow here, Jebediah," he said, putting an arm around Jyraiu's shoulder. "He's a performer, an artist! A great creative spirit. I'm sure he'd be interested in your exploits. Those that are true, at least."

And what about you, Edwin?

Aliana sat down too, staring at Edwin as she started to eat. "Try this one," she said, putting a piece of lightly fried fish on Ilea's plate.

"Thanks," Ilea said, popping it in her mouth.

"All your schooling, and that's the result?" Edwin said, looking at Aliana. "Maybe we should cut the funding for your education. It's obviously not doing anything." He turned back to Jyraiu. "Are you not interested in her? She's good-looking, influential, rich, and powerful. She

could make you famous in a single day. Lilith… I hear you grant wishes to poor folk and slaves lost in the wilderness. Is that true?”

Ilea displaced the man outside, a few dozen meters in the air. “The fish is excellent, Aliana,” she said, smiling at the woman sitting next to her. “Perfectly fried.”

The woman returned her smile, eating a piece herself as a man fell past the half-overgrown windows, a dull crash reaching their ears a moment later.

“Is he doing all this on purpose?” Ilea asked.

“I’ve thought about it before. He definitely has enough reasons to feel some guilt. Though he never talks about it. Perhaps he’ll open up a little with our new friend here,” Aliana said.

Jyraiu looked like a death spirit staring down two Ice Elementals.

“I didn’t mean to intimidate you,” Ilea said, using her healing on him to calm him down a little. He hid it well, but her status and the stories about her had definitely left an impression.

Guess I had a little too much fun with those noble kids in Halstein.

And Edwin…

It felt strange to see him like that. She felt both shame and empathy. He was lashing out, but after everything that had happened, everything he’d worked for, pushed for, she kind of understood.

It still sucked for everyone involved.

She focused on Jyraiu again. Now that she got a better look at him, listening to his heartbeat and seeing his tense body language, he didn’t strike her as a particularly experienced adventurer.

[Fire Enhancer – lvl 158]

“Don’t mention it. It’s not every day that one gets to meet a living legend. I was simply struck by your presence,” he said smoothly, though the sweat rolling down his back betrayed his demeanor. “And I’m sure he’ll improve,” he added, looking at Aliana.

A moment later, Edwin stumbled in with a laugh, brushing leaves and dust from his clothes, not a single injury visible.

“Nice trick. Reminds me of Maria. Is she coming for lunch too? To finish the reunion? Why not invite that quiet metal mage of yours too? I’m sure he could nod along rather well as you speak.”

Ilea looked at him. “You don’t seem well, Edwin.”

He just waved her off and continued drinking.

Doesn’t seem like you care anymore.

She looked at Edwin, at the blood mage who had given her her first real taste of what a level two hundred human was capable of.

Even now, he’s more capable than half the Shadows I know. It’s a shame, really.

“Wait… Did he come back?” Aliana asked quietly.

“What?” Ilea asked, looking at her.

She seemed a little taken aback. “Kyrian. He was… teleported away.”

“Ah, sorry. Yeah… we found him,” Ilea said with a smile. *Right. How could I forget? Now I feel bad.* “He’s doing okay. It’ll take him some time to adjust, though. I could get a message to him if you want?”

Aliana sighed. “I would like that, I think. Though I don’t know if I could even visit. I assume he’s in Ravenhall?”

“Yes. And we’ll see. We might be able to arrange something.”

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TWENTY-TWO

Growing Awareness

“You fought an Elemental? I find that hard to believe,” Edwin said, shaking his head.

“You didn’t even know they existed a minute ago,” Ilea said. She felt more and more frustrated talking to him.

He waved her off. “Well, I saved the village of Verlan from a mud monster infestation in a nearby pond,” Edwin said, pushing his elbow into Jyraiu. “Tell her about them! They were nearly level one fifty. Hardly ever felt my heart pump that fast. The adrenaline was overwhelming.”

“I can believe that.”

“It really wasn’t worth mentioning,” Jyraiu whispered, his soul seemingly trying to flee all on its own.

“Maybe I’ll be able to offer you an interesting position in the future, Edwin,” Ilea said. “Something that fits your abilities a little more than fighting mud monsters.”

The look in his eyes changed, his smile turning predatory. “So that’s why you came. And here I thought you just wanted to meet my dear little sister.”

She gave him a thin smile as Jyraiu tried to get even farther away from him.

“Don’t flatter yourself. Of course I came for her. It’s been a while since we prevented extensive blood rituals together in Baralia, effectively saving tens of thousands of human lives.”

“Ah, you’re some kind of savior now? Did the flattery of your mindless followers and admirers go to your head?” Edwin said. “I also hear you slaughtered half an army in Riverwatch.”

“I live with the choices I made. Maybe you should start doing the same.”

Edwin didn’t rebuke her this time, instead opening another bottle before he drank angrily.

“What a merry group of characters,” a new voice said. Everyone turned to see Felicia stepping into the room. She sighed and gave Ilea a warm smile. “And still so, so much better than what I just came from. It’s good to see you, Ilea.”

“And you,” Ilea answered.

“You should’ve heard General Gardt rant about incompetent scouts when it was reported that you’d vanished within our very own capital.” She laughed as she sat down. “Do you have some time? I’d love to hear about your adventures – I’ve been so very busy.”

Edwin looked between them, his eyes focusing on Felicia for a few seconds before he glanced at Ilea and left without another word.

“You don’t have to stay if you’re uncomfortable,” Aliana said, looking at Jyraiu.

The man took a deep breath, closing his eyes as his heart rate increased. When he opened them again, a spark of flame was visible within. “I would love to hear a few of your stories, Lady Lilith. If you would have me.”

“I don’t mind. Just don’t spread them to the bards,” Ilea said. She wouldn’t mention the elves or anything else controversial or grand. Felicia didn’t seem to be interested in those sorts of tales anyway. As Aliana conjured up another round of freshly prepared dishes, she began to speak.

“I visited Halstein for the first time…”

* * *

She stayed for a while, but Felicia sadly had to leave again soon after. They walked for a little while before saying their goodbyes.

“You’re not planning on staying in the capital for long, then?” Felicia asked.

“No.”

Though I kind of wish I could. Strange. I know it would complicate her situation a lot. But yeah...

"A long flight ahead, then?"

"Not exactly." She paused and looked at the sky. "Maybe I could visit more often."

"Maybe."

Ilea could feel the tension.

She also felt a bit confused.

"I'll see you around, Felicia. It was nice to chat."

"Yeah. I'm quite busy, but... let me know whenever you're in the area."

"I will."

Ilea smiled and activated the third tier of Transfer.

* * *

It took her less than five minutes to reach Claire's office. She asked Trian to join them as well and then gave them a quick rundown of her meetings with both the Corinth Order and the Order of Balance.

"So, our assumptions were right," Trian said when Ilea was done. "I'm glad things kind of worked out in the end."

"It's going to be an interesting few weeks," Claire said. "But it's been an interesting few weeks for a few years now. If the Orders act as they say they will, the Sentinels should be able to travel freely, with nothing to worry about from the other Healing Orders. And we'll hear from Kroll too, I'm sure."

"Yeah. I hope I didn't do too much," Ilea said. "I definitely had some fun trying out all my new abilities."

"I'm sure you did. I just wish I could have seen their faces. That royal dinner sounds delightful," Claire said with a wistful tone.

Ilea stretched, then yawned. "Anything else you need my help with? Otherwise, I'll probably go north. It's been a long day. Did I mention that I can just teleport there now?"

"You did, yes," Trian said.

She smiled. "It's fucking cool, right? Imagine if I could have done that back in the demon realm."

Or in Erendar.

“Great work out there, Ilea. I’ll try to keep the queens and kings off your back,” Claire said.

“Thanks. If anything comes up, you can reach me through the mark.” Ilea made a telephone gesture, which she assumed was lost on the others. “And let me know how things develop with the Healing Orders. I’ll join the Sentinels whenever I have time.”

But now, I want to see a lady about some enchantments.

* * *

Sometime later, Ilea checked her armor and smiled. It felt good. Actually usable.

“Thanks, Iana,” she said.

Iana smiled. “Let me know if you want any changes,” she said before she rejoined Christopher to continue their work on the gates.

[Heavy Scorching Wyrm Armor – Draconic Quality] *Enchantments*
[Durability 5 / Hardening 6 / Mana Flow 3]

This thing should be hard to destroy, even for a four-mark. As long as I survive within it.

Ilea put the armor into her necklace before she summoned it around herself. The weight was immediately noticeable, but with all her buffs, she didn’t mind it too much. Still, it was enough that she wouldn’t use this set in any battles where evasion was paramount. Her ash simply formed on top of the wyrm scales, layering on top of it until she was covered in several sets of defenses. She felt pretty massive, though nowhere near as much as when she wore the armaments.

“Now try this,” Goliath said, handing her his creation.

Ilea took the prototype that Goliath held out to her. The rifle had two massive grips: one near the middle of its length, the other closer to where it would touch her shoulder. Its length was mostly smooth, with a few openings that allowed her to insert her ash.

Near the middle of the rifle was a large inset for the Wyrm eye, the rifle extending into a barrel beyond that. The width reminded Ilea more of an artillery piece than anything a human would carry.

On the top, close to the shoulder stock, was a long scope without any glass or tech inside. It was a simple tube, but with her enhanced eyesight, it would serve its purpose. At the front of the barrel was a crosshair that would help her aim.

[Scorching Beam Cannon – Draconic Quality] *Enchantments* ***[Durability 5 / Hardening 6 / Heat Resistance 2]***

"Yeah. This is exactly what I wanted, thank you," Ilea said as she aimed through the scope. She had never actually fired a rifle, or any gun for that matter, but a focus for her Embered Heart was very much welcome. She summoned the Wyrm eye and displaced it into the inset, charging heat as a few ashen tendrils moved into the openings on the sides of the cannon. "Can I get a wall, Meadow?"

The being obliged, creating stone that likely outclassed any defensive walls that humanity could produce.

Ilea released her spell. The charged heat extended into the Wyrm eye before it was sent out through the barrel, causing a bright beam to burn into the stone wall for a little over a second. She didn't use a lot of heat, but the wall was glowing, the beam having burned deep into the stone.

"An impressive tool, I will admit," the Meadow sent.

"Do you think you could add some kind of magnifying glass to the scope, Goliath?"

"I lack the knowledge and tools to create what you seek," the smith said.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to find a high-level glass mage or something," Ilea said. "Thanks for the work. Both this and the armor. It's all lovely."

"You will break it soon enough," Goliath said, though he seemed amused with the prospect.

"Ilea, do you have time for a few more tests?" Iana called out to her.

"For you? Sure."

* * *

Ilea spent the next few weeks training with the Meadow and the creatures of the Descent and working with the enchanters. They had yet to receive word

from the Cerithil Hunters, which meant she had time.

She often returned to Ravenhall to get some air. She could help out the Sentinels with her arcane healing, and in turn, they tried to help with her resistances. They had varying degrees of success, even with her ability to disable her defenses entirely. She even went to the Krahen Isles to check in on her team there, though she didn't kill any more beasts herself.

Her skills were growing steadily, and while she was itching to get back out there, she felt like she could improve quite a bit before doing so. With so many of her skills enhanced now and reset to the beginning of the third tier, she had her work cut out for her. But mainly, she was focused on her third Class. Before she pushed that one to five hundred, she wanted to have all the skills maxed out.

It felt nice, with Ravenhall thriving, the Meadow protecting Hallowfort, and her own ability to travel quickly between the cities. She could bring her friends, too. And for once, there was no corruption or demon summoning to bother her.

As time went on, Ilea found her intuitive understanding of space magic increasing, allowing her to progress faster with the various puzzles presented by the Meadow. By now, most of it seemed abstract at best. Concepts she simply felt more than truly grasped. Even so, she could find the solution, the missing links, the irregularities, and the hidden pockets.

The most striking realization of her progress was when Violence returned one day. Its Faen form didn't look quite as simple anymore. Where it had been an abyss-like darkness before, just looking at it now gave her a headache. There were so many layers and shifting parts, so she quickly made it part of her training to observe the creature whenever it graced them with a visit.

She spent plenty of time fighting the Griffin and Young Elemental in between, occasionally bothering the Trakorov as well.

During their occasional dancing lessons, Claire informed Ilea of the progress she was making on various projects. Ravenhall had extended its trade agreements with both Kroll and Lys, slowly bringing the new city-state and other nations closer both economically and diplomatically. Her visit to Halstein had also left an impression, and neither the Corinth Order nor the Order of Balance hindered the Sentinels now traveling through the Plains.

* * *

A Fae copy rushed after the original, several Knights of Lilith trying to keep up. One of the ashen forms carried Quiet, the warhammer, another two wielded swords and shields of ash, and one even wore Ilea's bone armor. The Meadow sometimes interrupted the ongoing battle with sets of obstacles made of roots or stone, but the rest of them worked quietly on their own projects.

"You look lost," Ilea said, right after solving the latest question posed by space itself. Or perhaps it was the Meadow who had asked it. It had become more difficult to separate the two entirely.

Kyrian glanced at her and gave a soft smile. "A little."

"Hmm."

Ilea summoned a dish and started to eat. Kyrian had joined her for a bit of training in the north after she had helped him and Feyrair face higher-level Bluetails. Their goal was to kill a four-mark on their own, but while their levels were increasing steadily, they didn't quite have the firepower and regeneration to pull it off yet.

At least they had her help to try and fail without actually dying. Until their real go of course, then they'd have to be on their own.

She gave him a glance and smiled.

[Metal Mage – lvl 441]

Still a way to go. But they'll get there.

As the horde of ashen beings rushed after the Fae, Ilea ate her meal and looked through the many notifications she had managed to unlock.

'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
'ding' Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
'ding' Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2
'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
'ding' Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3

‘ding’ Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 24
…
‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 29
‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 28
…
‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 30
‘ding’ Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 25
…
‘ding’ Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 29
‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 23
…
‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 28
‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 28
…
‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 30
‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 9
…
‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 28

Ilea was sure that the massive jump in her third Class’ abilities was directly connected to her rapidly developing Space Awareness. Everything felt connected.

She was glad to have achieved her awareness only *after* befriending the Meadow. With what she could perceive now, she wasn’t sure their relationship would’ve formed quite the way it had back in Erendar. While she had known intellectually that the creature wielded magic beyond most she had met before, now she could see a part of the truth. The Meadow had been seen as a god, and Ilea was starting to understand why.

“And here I thought staring was considered rude among your kind,” the being said.

Ilea looked away. *“Sorry. I’ll get used to it in time. You’re just… a lot to take in.”*

“I understand that your perception has changed. Though I do hope it won’t affect how you view me.”

She smiled. *“Of course not. And in a way, I’m sorry too. You know I don’t want to be afraid of you. I’ll get used to it.”*

For once, the Meadow didn’t reply.

An incomprehensible being from another realm. Yeah. I’ll get used to it in time. I really hope I do.

Ilea tried to ignore the unending depths that she now saw within the fabric of space and all around the Meadow and read through the rest of her notifications instead.

‘ding’ Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 3
…
‘ding’ Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 12
‘ding’ Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 2
…
‘ding’ Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 9
‘ding’ Dancing reaches lvl 4
‘ding’ Dancing reaches lvl 5
‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 13
‘ding’ Drill reaches lvl 2
‘ding’ Drill reaches lvl 3
‘ding’ Gourmet reaches lvl 7
‘ding’ Monstrous reaches lvl 2
‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches 2nd lvl 8
‘ding’ Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 10
…
‘ding’ Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 13
‘ding’ Soul Perception reaches lvl 10
‘ding’ Spear of Ash reaches lvl 3
…
‘ding’ Spear of Ash reaches lvl 14
‘ding’ Teaching reaches lvl 7
‘ding’ Teaching reaches lvl 8

Her derivative skills had leveled throughout her training, with each level-up making each specialization just a little better. Monstrous had also

gained a level, apparently simply from people identifying her while it was active. Either that or the skill just gradually leveled as long as she hid her three-mark status.

‘ding’ Ash Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3
‘ding’ Ash Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4
‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5
‘ding’ Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17

It hadn’t come as a surprise to her that some of the Sentinels had picked up that skill from Orthan. The Alymie instructor was a capable bone magic user, after all.

‘ding’ Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10
‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4
‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5
‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 23
‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 6
...
‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9
‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 10
‘ding’ Petrification Resistance reaches lvl 8
…
‘ding’ Petrification Resistance reaches lvl 14
‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 10

She was progressing well, and with her third Class skills so close to their maximum level, she felt comfortable again with the idea of exploration. And maybe the occasional level-up. Unlike some of her adventures before, though, she had a goal in mind this time. Or a group of goals.

Ilea summoned the locator that Iana, Christopher, and the Meadow had made for her. Isalthar hadn’t made contact yet, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t start looking for more keys. If the device worked as the enchanters suggested, it would lead her to the closest of the ancient dwarven artifacts.

According to Iana, there were twelve in total, and Ilea already knew that they had some connection with the One without Form. To learn more from the strange being, she needed to have three keys in her possession. And she intended to make that happen.

In the meantime, she could explore wherever it was that such ancient artifacts had ended up.

I hope it'll be more interesting than just more Taleen ruins.

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TWENTY-THREE

Intruders

“You’re planning to start your exploration, then?” Kyrian asked.

“Yeah. Maybe a little bit. I could use a change of pace. And scenery,” Ilea said. “Besides, I can always return. Do you want to join in?”

He gave it some consideration before he shook his head. “No. I think I need a break for a little while. Maybe a few days in Ravenhall would do me good.”

“No intention of going to Virilya?” Ilea asked with a slight grin. She had told him about her visit to the Redleaf Estate. And of Aliana.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, snapping his helmet shut with a clang.

Ilea laughed and then gave him a smile. “I’m rooting for you, Kyrian. Call me whenever you need another lift.”

She activated her third-tier Transfer and connected Kyrian to her ongoing spell with Displacement.

“See you around!” she sent to the Meadow, receiving a mental wave in response.

“Good luck on your hunt.”

They appeared in her house a moment later, Ilea instantly spreading her wings to avoid breaking the wooden floor. She narrowed her eyes, her attention on the two people sitting at her dinner table.

What is this?

Is that…?

Ilea did a double-take and then breathed out. One of the two women was Verena Quill, Elder of the Shadow's Hand.

What's she doing in my house?

"There she is…" Verena murmured, looking at them with apprehension. It was the first time Ilea had seen her up close.

She looked to be in her mid-twenties, though her tanned skin was scarred in many places. Long curly brown hair fell onto her bare shoulders, while a thick steel chest piece covered her torso, its dark red color scratched off in a few places. A red fur loincloth padded with leather covered her waist and her upper legs, while fur boots completed the look.

[Flame Berserker – lvl 342]

Yeah. I've come a long way.

Next to Verena sat another woman, staring at the two newcomers. Her wide eyes were blue, just like Ilea's, and her skin was almost unnaturally pale. She held a book and turned a few more pages before she threw it behind her and cocked her head to the side.

She was considerably smaller than Verena. While the Elder looked the part of a Berserker, the muscles on her arms thick and massive, this woman looked downright wiry. Her black hair was straight and long, falling freely down her back, and she wore a pale blue dress, richly embroidered and decorated with inlaid jewelry.

[Lightning Mage – lvl 318]

Another one above three hundred.

The woman stood up and extended her arms in greeting, lightning crackling in her hands as she grinned widely, her eyes sparking with joy.

"Welcome home, Lilith!" Then she lowered her voice and whispered, "Or should we say, Ilea?" She giggled. "Fake names and mysteries, I love them. Did I already mention I love them? Of course I didn't. We just met. Wait. We haven't met before, right?" she asked, her words coming thick and fast.

Before Ilea could reply, Verena spoke up. "Lilith, apologies for the intrusion. I tried to reason with her, but… you'll figure it out."

Ilea raised an eyebrow.

“Anyway, welcome!” the lightning mage continued unperturbed. “We’ve been waiting for hours. Days, maybe. I’m not sure.” She seemed genuinely puzzled for a moment. “Either way, super boring. And she didn’t even let me play with the cats in the cave. Can you believe it? Dangerous creatures so close to your house, and we’re right here! Ah well. Who’s he?” She opened her mouth slightly. “Oh… you’re powerful too. As expected of the mystical figure of Lilith. I assume he’s already taken?” she asked, glancing at Ilea with a sunny smile.

Ilea tilted her head to the side as her wings slowly lowered her down to the ground. The floorboards creaked just a little bit as she landed. “I still don’t know who you are, or what you’re doing here.”

The woman curtsied with an innocent smile. Her whole demeanor made her seem immature, though Ilea thought her to be in her early thirties. When she had reached the two hundreds, that was. For all Ilea knew, she could actually be centuries old. There was something about the curtsy and her mannerisms that put Ilea on edge, though beyond the woman’s obvious chaotic energy, she couldn’t put a finger on it.

“I’m Dragonkiller Pierce, Elder of the Shadow’s Hand and exiled daughter of House Pierce of Nipha. When I came back to check in on the state of, you know, whatever all this is, and stock up on some nice food and drink, I heard that there was a new big girl in town.” She clapped her hands and smiled. “I really wanted to meet her. Meet you, that is! And she came along.” She pointed at Verena. “I met her on the way. Really lucky! She’s usually gone for years.”

Verena grunted in a way that suggested she didn’t exactly agree.

“I decided that finding your house and letting ourselves in was a lot more interesting than the usual ways of getting in touch, talking to people, sending letters, yadda yadda, you know? Also, playing around with the enchantments that protected this place seemed fun.”

Protected? Past tense?

Ilea glanced at Verena, who merely raised her hands as if to say she’d tried.

Dragonkiller Pierce stepped into her line of sight. “The guards said you usually came from this direction, so we went and looked. This place isn’t exactly hidden. Also, by the deaths of my ancestors, you’re a three-mark? How?”

“You talk a lot,” Ilea said.

“I do, yes. So, the three marks? You must have found some ungodly amounts of high-level creatures to kill! That’s way harder than it seems at first. You know, in the two hundreds, everything is kind of dangerous, but once you get to this level”—she pointed at herself—“you either find lackluster dungeons or creatures that could wipe you out with a thought. Not that that isn’t interesting too!”

Ilea tried to process everything she had heard.

“Elder Pierce… You’re an Elder of the Shadow’s Hand, then?”

Pierce smiled. “Hah! Yes. I told you she wouldn’t believe me! Verena, back me up!”

“She’s an Elder of the Shadow’s Hand,” Verena sighed. “Though I don’t think that means anything at this point. Not with the Council and an independent Ravenhall.”

Right. The Council hasn’t brought up the matter of the Elders. At least not in my presence. I’m starting to see why. With Wallace Urn dead, Adam Strand having betrayed the city and now on some unknown quest in the demon realm, and Elder Lucas working with the Meadow in the north, that only leaves these two.

“Is that why you’re here, then?” Ilea asked. “Because of all the changes in Ravenhall?”

Verena gave her a long look. “Partially. It took some work to keep outside influence out. The Shadow’s Hand always needed powerful people to fill that role. To dissuade whoever was in charge in whatever country was currently most influential in the Plains from undermining and controlling our mercenary order for whatever goals they had. It seems like you, coupled with everyone in the council, have risen beyond even that. I wanted to fight you. I still do. But seeing that you’re a three-mark puts some of my worries at ease.”

Pierce walked toward the other Elder and moved her hands frantically. “What? Didn’t you want to have this massive clash for who was top dog? Where did all of that go? You wanted to wreck the house!”

“I didn’t want to wreck the house, and there’s no top dog. Stop fucking around, Pierce. The Hand is still around because we worked together. Things are in motion, it seems, more than they have been in a while. I guess we have Adam and you to thank for that, Ilea.”

Pierce groaned and did a theatrical almost-faint. “Ohh, this is *sooo* boring. Please stop talking about all this shit. So, Lilith, oh great and commanding Lilith, what are you up to? Any… interesting adventures or anything?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business, Elder.”

Pierce casually walked up to her and put an arm around her shoulder. “Elder? Ilea, there’s no need to be so formal. I’m a Shadow, you’re a Shadow, she’s a Shadow.” She let go of Ilea before she could even push her away and moved her attention to Kyrian. “And maybe, maybe he’s a Shadow too!”

“I heard you went to the north,” Pierce said, twirling between Ilea and Kyrian. “Have you been north north? Like, up there, where even the lightning doesn’t reach?”

Where the lightning doesn’t reach?

“You’ve been to the north, then?” Ilea asked. It wasn’t massively surprising, given her level, but back when Ilea had considered it, Dagon and everyone else had seemed to think it was a foolish idea. Then again, she could see how both Pierce and Verena had likely ignored those warnings, too.

Pierce walked past Ilea, taking a good look at Kyrian now. “Sturdy. Stoic. Or… scared?” She tried to get closer, but the metal mage took a step back. “Shy… how interesting. Can you not speak?”

“I can speak.” Kyrian extended his metal to keep Pierce at bay, who giggled and touched it. A spark of lightning formed and crawled over the steel.

“Nice. That is some proper armor,” Pierce whispered.

Verena stood up now and approached Ilea. “You must’ve fought some strong creatures. Four-marks, too. You have a third Class, no?”

“I did. And yes, I do. I was lucky in finding high-level creatures available in abundance.”

Verena made a wistful sound. “That’s how it goes. Most of the threats I hunt are no match for me, or lack the numbers to provide a climb like yours. Don’t tell me anything about the third Class. I’ll figure it out myself when I get there.”

Ilea smiled. She liked that notion. Maybe Pierce was right about them all being Shadows. She’d been on edge because of all the Lily business and her recent visit to Halstein. Everyone was playing some game, and Ilea was

part of it too now. With Ravenhall and the Sentinels, and Riverwatch and Hallowfort, she expected to get involved again in the future.

This so-called Dragonkiller Pierce and Verena were surely involved in different parts of the Plains too, but right now, it felt like they were just Shadows. High-level adventurers looking for an interesting thrill.

Pierce walked past her again, giving her an intrigued side glance. “You’ve made quite the waves in the Plains. Lilith this, Lilith that. I was sure you were some kind of beast masquerading as a human adventurer. But here we are. You’re flesh and blood, just like us. Oh, I *am* envious. Your healer thing must’ve really worked out for you.”

“That it did,” Ilea said.

“Yes. That it must’ve. That’s what I said!” Pierce pointed at her, then she narrowed her eyes and grinned slightly. “You’re low-born, aren’t you?”

“I am. Whatever that should mean.”

“It means you had to do more work than others to reach your place in the world. It also means you pushed beyond what others think is possible, or reasonable, or desirable. And it also means that you’re not a stuck-up, abusive, piece of controlling, power-hungry shit.”

She grinned. “It’s funny, really. They come and go, poison each other, or kill each other in their sleep. And yet they call us the monsters. And so, now you’re the new monster of Ravenhall. Congratulations. So, what are you up to? What kind of monster is the three-mark Lilith, ruler of Ravenhall and the southern mountains, terror of Baralia, and savior of Hallowfort, looking to hunt?”

Ilea couldn’t help but smile. It felt absurd. Two Elders of the Shadow’s Hand had broken into her house to meet her. She was caught between kicking them out and taking them along on her search for the keys, just for the fun of it.

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TWENTY-FOUR

Treasure Island

“Wait. You know Hallowfort?” Ilea asked.

“You think you’re the only one who ever went north?” Pierce said. “Most die in the storms or to the Miststalkers, but once you understand the dangers, it’s quite a lovely place.”

Ilea agreed.

Pierce narrowed her eyes and looked at her. “You came here with long-range teleportation, then? That’s so lucky. I haven’t gotten anything like that yet. Can’t believe both you and Verena got it before me. I worked so hard on my teleports, too.”

Ilea gave the other Elder a look.

“Highly limited,” Verena said. “And I’m interested in your current objectives, too. Maybe we can be of service? I want to see you fight.”

“Yeah. I’m thinking about it. You mentioned Hallowfort?” Ilea said, trying to steer the conversation back in that direction.

“Yes. Lovely place. It’s been… a long while. The Descent was a little too dangerous, so I let that one be. But there are lots of dangerous dungeons up in the north. Ancient ruins and all. Did you know there were once humans who lived there?” Pierce asked. “Freaked me out when I found out. As if everything we were taught was a lie. Inferior species my ass. We were far more powerful then. Doesn’t matter anyway. I love the expression on an Elf’s or Feynor’s face when they realize I’m not the pushover they thought me to be,” she added with a grin.

“Are you sure you’re not part elf?” Ilea asked. “You’re just missing the hisses.”

“Hah. Funny.”

“There are reasonable ones too, you know. Not part of the Domains.”

“You’re still on our side, I hope?” Verena said.

“Of course. As for what I’m working on, it’s quite simple. I’m trying to find the locations of some ancient Taleen artifacts. And then recovering them.”

“The Taleen… ah, those green metal machines. Yeah, those ruins are all over the place, and usually not worth going into,” Pierce said.

“What kind of artifacts?” Verena asked.

“That’s all I’ll say for now,” Ilea said.

“I see. Well, I’m still intrigued.”

Pierce clapped her hands together. “A treasure hunt, then! Can we join? Please! I’m good with enchantments, and Verena has axes or something.”

Ilea smiled. “Sure. I don’t mind some company. But if it gets too dangerous, we might have to part ways.”

“What? Can you believe that, Verena? If it gets too dangerous?” Pierce laughed.

Verena just gave Ilea a nod. “I won’t get in the way. She’s pretty durable, too.”

“I am. Now let’s go. I haven’t killed anything in ages.”

“You killed a deer earlier,” Verena said.

“Ages, I tell you!” Pierce added, twirling back to face Kyrian. “Coming, metal mage?”

“No,” he answered curtly.

“Shame. Well, off we go, then. Where to, Lilith?” Pierce asked, pointing at the sky.

Ilea displaced the four of them outside.

“Whoa. Space magic! Nice!” Pierce exclaimed.

“Well, good luck with… all this,” Kyrian said, gesturing vaguely.

Ilea smiled. “Thanks. Enjoy your time off, and say hi to the others for me,” she said, summoning the locator. “Call me when you need to get back.”

“Back where?” Pierce asked.

The map flashed as Ilea activated the relevant rune.

“Flashy. What’s that?” Pierce asked, flying over with two wings of blue lightning.

“Will do. And you call if you need help,” Kyrian said as he ascended. “Good luck.”

She gave him a wave, ignoring Pierce as she floated around her, looking at the device and the map with large eyes.

“Dragonkiller… What’s that about, then?” Ilea asked to distract her.

“Oh… it’s an ambition. I haven’t managed it yet, but I will. One day, I will! They’re fearsome, crazy creatures. The pinnacle of magic, some say…” She paused and whispered conspiratorially. “I say that. It’s me who says it.”

Ilea smiled at her, then focused on her device.

Verena hovered toward them, fire burning on her skin.

So, a bunch of ancient keys. What do we think, buried in random Taleen dungeons, or in the pockets of an Oracle, Elemental, or Ascended? Maybe an Elemental Oracle. All of that would be interesting to see. And with my three marks… hmm. How would I fare, I wonder? At the very least, I could work on my skills.

The locator didn’t show anything in their direct vicinity. Instead, the arrow was pointing to the northeast, out toward the ocean.

Wonderful start. Did some Kraken eat it?

“Taleen artifacts, huh? That thing looks Taleen, too,” Pierce said.

“What do you know about them?”

“Interesting to fight. An ancient and lost civilization, like so many others out there. Hardly worth mentioning, to be honest. They built their machines and vanished. Or so the story goes. Probably part of the dwarven kingdoms now.”

“Teleportation gates,” Verena said, looking at the map before it vanished. “Oh… you found a map, then? Or something more? Did you find a way to access them? That could be useful. And dangerous.”

“Oh… if you can use those and that info gets out, things will get interesting real soon,” Pierce said. She smiled. “Don’t worry, I won’t tattle.”

Ilea decided not to comment on any of that. “The arrow points out into the ocean. Any idea what’s out there?”

“A few islands. High-level monsters,” Verena said. “Beyond that? Death.”

“How high?” Ilea asked.

“Three, four hundred, maybe more,” the woman answered. “I didn’t go far.”

“What if it’s pointing to another continent?” Pierce asked. “I don’t want to fly over the ocean for weeks.”

“I didn’t ask you to come,” Ilea said.

“No, no, I’ll come, I’ll come,” Pierce said defensively.

Verena shook her head. “If it is another continent, we should turn back. Or let her go alone. We aren’t ready.”

“You’ve been to another continent?” Ilea asked.

“So have others. Perhaps you, of all people, could survive, but I don’t advise it. The storms are similar to those in the north, but even fiercer.”

“That might be an interesting place to visit, then. One day, perhaps. Let’s follow the locator for now.”

“Follow the locator!” Pierce exclaimed with enthusiasm, her wings sparking with mana.

Ilea smiled and hovered out over the waves crashing against the cliffs far below. She charged her wings as she looked at the arrow. “About there, I suppose,” she said and pointed before she put the device away, spreading her ash mantle and layering it.

Pierce whistled, flying around her in a circle. “So that’s your getup. A little barbaric, but manageable. I like the wings a lot, and it seems like your manipulation is refined. A bit lame that you’re using ash. Metal is just straight-up better, but I’d guess you have some other benefits. It does explain how you’ve reached that level of power so quickly. Can’t have an ash mage that isn’t at least somewhat reckless.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“Lots of Sentinels are ash mages,” Verena remarked.

Pierce smiled. “Well-chosen individuals, then,” she said. “Let’s see if you can keep up with me.”

Verena sighed. “Just make sure you both wait for me.”

“I can mark you two, if you like,” Ilea said.

“That’s such a Lilith thing to say. What’s next, you’re gonna turn us into slaves with your mind magic?” Pierce said. “Just start throwing some fire around if we’re too far ahead, Verena.”

“Never underestimate the ocean,” Verena answered.

Pierce waved her off, a shockwave extending from her wings as more power flowed through them. “Just don’t go under.”

A split second later, the woman vanished.

Ilea could barely follow her, a line of blue flying into the distance before an explosion of air resounded a few hundred meters ahead. The Dragonkiller had just broken through the sound barrier.

“How is she only at level three hundred?” Ilea asked.

“She gets distracted easily.”

“Yeah, fair. Sure you don’t want that mark?”

Verena raised a hand. “I appreciate it. And I trust you, Ilea. You’re honest, I can tell. But no foreign marks.”

“Understood. At least fly ahead so I can see if you need a lift,” Ilea said.

Verena shot off without another word, considerably slower than Pierce – or Ilea, for that matter.

Ilea quickly caught up with Verena’s burning form, reaching out with a few ashen limbs before her charged wings pushed them both forward. Ilea had no way of catching the Dragonkiller, even without carrying Verena.

Lightning seems to be the way to go when it comes to sheer speed.

Ilea wondered when Trian would manifest speeds like that, though she also wondered how maneuverable Pierce was in that form. Ilea already had difficulties with her ashen wings…

Just as she had the thought, a bird exploded against her chest, though she barely noticed the impact. At least she could trust her defenses to overwhelm the risks that came with this kind of momentum. She hoped the same was true for Pierce’s dress.

A streak of blue lightning flashed up ahead, going around in a wide circle over the stormy ocean before it joined Ilea and Verena. As they regrouped, Ilea saw Pierce was now covered in form-fitting dark blue armor, lightning arcing over and through it all. Her metal helm flowed aside to reveal a broad smirk.

“One win for the Dragonkiller.”

“Yeah, you’re quick,” Ilea said. It felt exciting to her more than anything. It meant she could reach a faster speed too.

“Maybe I can convince you to show me your hunting grounds… I’ll come for you in no time, you lucky, lucky healer,” Pierce said as she twirled in the air, a pulse of lightning seamlessly flowing out from her armor.

Lightning flashed a few kilometers away, dark clouds now covering most of the horizon. They had already traveled a long way.

“Where does the pointy thing point to, treasurer?” Pierce asked, watching Ilea summon the device.

They adjusted course a few more times, flying over the open ocean on their approach to something that at least seemed to be getting closer, based on the more frequent course corrections they had to make.

A single island came into view about twenty minutes later. It was just a rocky outcrop, with not a single tree or other form of vegetation visible. A large chunk of it looked wet as well, suggesting a submerged state at least in stormy weather. It was only a few kilometers across, though the jagged bits and deep shadows below the waterline hinted at its true size.

“I haven’t been here. This is farther out than the islands I meant,” Verena informed them.

“New territory!” Pierce shouted. “Sense anything, girls?” she asked and crouched in midair, looking around like some kind of hunter listening for predators.

“Nothing,” Verena said.

“I can call and see if something shows up,” Ilea suggested.

Pierce waved her hands around. “Nononono, bad idea. Not out here, are you crazy? Any idea how well sound travels through water? You’re going to wake some things that have been sleeping for millennia. Do that when you’re a four-mark, or later.”

Ilea thought back to the Leviathan and nodded.

“You’re probably right. Should we land?”

Pierce teleported down onto the surface, several hundred meters away.

And here I thought I was the space mage.

By the time the other two landed, Pierce had started smashing a metal pole into the stone, a black flag with the Shadows’ emblem in white attached to the top. It flapped in the wind as the cracking of stone filled the air before the Elder finally stepped back, admiring her addition to the landscape.

“Another frontier claimed by humanity.”

“I wouldn’t say claimed. We’ve only just arrived,” Ilea said. She looked around, trying to use Sentinel Huntress and her dominion to see if anything had been here recently.

No magic, no droppings. It’s just a rock.

The locator arrow twirled around randomly before finally pointing downward when Ilea tilted the device to the side.

“A magnificent piece of land. Which we have now conquered,” Pierce said, now wearing a sailor’s uniform and extending a telescope. “So, where next?”

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TWENTY-FIVE

Drilling

Hey, I could use that for my cannon, Ilea thought, looking at the telescope and sailor ensemble Pierce had pulled from thin air. *She's a bit over the top, but I should probably have more outfits in my necklace, too. Hmm, I just really like my ash, though...*

"This isn't part of another continent, is it?" Ilea asked Verena.

"I don't think so. Cavern entrance over there," she said, pointing.

"Good eyes. What we're looking for is below us."

Pierce clicked her telescope together and made it vanish. "Wonderful. I'm drenched," she said, walking toward the indicated location.

The others followed.

Ilea glanced at Verena. "Known her long?"

"We joined the Shadows in the same month."

"How old are you two?"

Verena looked up. "I think a little over seventy. Not sure about her. Probably similar."

"Wow, you really are Elders."

Pierce glanced back and hissed. "I heard that, young lass! You'll pay… once I'm strong enough. Just you wait six hundred years!"

"We are. Lucas and Adam are older," Verena said. "Lots of changes before us. Shadows tend to die often."

"Too confident when you're at this age. Gets easier and easier to make a mistake, I tell you," Pierce said. "You get complacent. Either way, most

give up the adventuring lifestyle. Which is boring and lame. I hope you'll die a glorious death in battle, Ilea."

"I can *only* die in battle. I'm immortal," Ilea said.

"You better be. You're a healer. If I don't see you come back from disintegration and beheading, I'll be disappointed."

"Dungeon. Quiet now," Verena said as they closed in on the entrance.

Ilea was surprised to find that Pierce did, in fact, quiet down immediately as they reached a large fissure in the dark, jagged stone. She could see the bottom from the edge and jumped down, followed almost instantly by the others, though no dungeon notification surfaced within her mind.

Did they just bury this one somewhere out in the ocean? I suppose you certainly wouldn't find it here without a device to locate it.

"No signs of monsters. Continue or leave? You said you needed to scout, not necessarily recover," Verena said.

"I did say that, yes," Ilea answered quietly. "But recovering the artifacts would be better. I think we can push on a little bit farther. If you think it's too dangerous, you can stay up there and wait."

"We know how much more powerful you are than us, Ilea. But we've escaped plenty of four-marks. You don't get to this age as an adventurer otherwise. Not at our level," Pierce said, then she touched the stone nearby. "This is natural."

"No way down either," Verena said.

"Then we dig," Ilea said, spreading ash in front of her, the vague image of a drill forming within the dark mist.

A few seconds later, they were pushing down into the stone, though Ilea's ash was making rather slow progress.

"You could just let Verena deal with it," Pierce said. "This will take a while."

"But it's quieter than my way," Verena said.

Ilea glanced at her. "You have something like this?"

The woman summoned two black axes lined with slightly glowing embers.

"Ah, I see," Ilea said.

Pierce looked at her and smiled. "That's all she does."

"It's effective," Verena said.

“I punch and heal,” Ilea said. “Well, I do a little more than that these days, but at the end of the day, I punch and heal.”

Verena gave her a long look and nodded slightly.

“What do you do, Dragonkiller?” Ilea asked Pierce.

An arc of lightning flowed over her armor. “Lightning. I’ve always enjoyed it, ever since that assassin came for me when I was eleven. Ah, memories…”

“Sounds like a rough childhood,” Ilea said. Their voices were entirely drowned out by the drilling, but none of them seemed to have a problem hearing each other. She displaced the larger stone chunks up and away, making sure none tumbled into the ocean, lest she wake something.

“Oh, it was fine after that,” Pierce said. “I left my home on that day. My twelfth birthday was much happier. Me, Kevin, the wolves…”

“Do I want to hear that story?”

“Nothing too peculiar. Kevin was a lightning mage too, and a goblin. We met in the wilderness and immediately understood each other. I don’t think he was much older than me, to be honest, but it’s hard to tell with goblins. They’re incredibly stupid. The assassins never found me in the tunnels we dug together. I never even found out who sent them. They were probably killed themselves a year or two after all that happened.”

“You really lived with a goblin mage in the wilderness?”

“It sounds unlikely, but yes. He was an outcast like me. They’re not fond of humans otherwise. Not at all. Ah, glorious was the day when we incinerated his tribe together. He taught me much.”

“Is he still around?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t know. He wanted to reach the highest peak to see the source of the lightning. A bunch of superstitious talk, but that’s goblin education for you. I showed him the way north a few decades later, and that was that. I’m sure he loved the arcane storms.”

“What was his level at the time?” Ilea asked, starting to see something within her dominion. They were coming up on familiar territory. “Taleen facility ahead.”

“Your perception goes far,” Verena said.

“Fifty? Something like that,” Pierce answered.

Ilea blinked her eyes. “Level fifty? And you sent him north?”

The woman laughed. “That goblin had a dream, I tell you. He really wanted to go, and who am I to stop a friend?”

Sounds like you sent him to his death, Ilea thought, but she didn't know Kevin, nor did she know about Pierce's situation back then.

"Maybe someone in Hallowfort knows if he made it through," she wondered out loud.

"I doubt it," Pierce said. "Finding that place is damn near impossible. I only ended up there because of the scavengers I stumbled upon more than a week's travel eastward. Good thing too, I was about to enter Feynor territory. Unpleasant, those."

"I've met them."

"Did you manage to talk? It didn't seem to me that they liked anything not resembling a dragon."

Your name probably didn't help.

"No. Well, there was some talk, but they just came to kill and kidnap. Catelyn, that was, and plenty of Awakened. I met Lucas there, actually. In an old Rhyvor city that the Awakened had taken over."

"They moved against Hallowfort? Seems like things are getting a little more tense up there. Maybe I should visit sometime," Pierce said. "It's nice that someone else knows about the ancient kingdoms in the north. Nobody wanted to believe me."

Yeah, I can see that.

"Is Lucas alive?" Verena asked.

"Yes," Ilea said, not elaborating.

The woman nodded. "Good." She seemed lost in thought for a moment before she spoke again. "Maro. He said something about Rhyvor."

Ilea perked up, looking at her.

"Who's that?" Pierce asked.

"I met him in Asila. He learned that I was a Shadow and offered me gold to kill monsters," Verena explained.

"What happened?" Ilea asked, trying not to betray her connection to the man. Mostly for the fun of it.

"He stumbled upon a cult summoning dangerous creatures. Like bats. But bigger. I killed them."

Why would he care about a cult? Wait. Of course he did. And he didn't even clean it up himself. Just don't start that shit in Ravenhall.

Ilea ignored the small thought in her mind that a cult of Lilith could very well be the next actor in another demon summoning. For whatever mad reason they came up with.

Claire, please protect our city.

"We're breaking through," Ilea said, and the group quieted down as her drill punched into a square room below.

'ding' You have entered the Izacanum dungeon

They were bathed in a familiar green light shining dimly from above. Ivy grew nearby, covering parts of the walls and ceiling.

Ilea's ashen drill vanished. They had gone deep. *Did they come from below?* she wondered, checking the nearby rooms and hallways with her dominion.

"A few Guardians," she whispered, summoning her locator before she silently continued through the door. The machines collapsed before they could reach them; Ilea's reverse healing, which spread through her dominion, took them out silently.

"What is that spell?" Verena asked in a quiet voice, her hands gripping her axes as she walked next to Ilea. Pierce had taken the rear.

"Reverse healing," Ilea answered.

Verena nodded. "Arcane… different options, I see. Good. It's silent."

Ilea found that the locator pointed to a location far from the only hallway they could currently access, but she wasn't too concerned. This wasn't a production facility, nor was it built by machines, it seemed. Ancient beds, stone furniture, and dark green metal plates with dried-out remains sitting on them lined the hallway.

They continued in silence, trying to follow the locator as they went from room to room, taking out any Guardians before they could even register the intruders.

Soon, they entered an expansive hall, once decorated with tapestries and fountains, now decrepit and forgotten. Ancient gears still turned and clicked within the walls. Ilea saw two Centurions standing about thirty meters away, readying their spears as they saw the approaching trio. This time, she didn't use her reverse healing; instead, she just looked at them.

A place like this might be a good test for Aki. Though we'd need a Praetorian, or something even better. I've still got another location I can set for my long-range teleports. But this might not be the best spot.

"Are you telling us to take care of them?" Pierce asked.

Ilea summoned her cannon, charging just a bit of heat as she aimed at the wall to the left of the first machine. Then she released the heat, whipping the rifle to the right. The bright beam illuminated the room for a split second, burning a deep furrow into the stone walls. The Centurions collapsed, their cores molten and their bodies sliced in half.

Pierce giggled. “Ah, yes. Impressive. I remember when I was young like you.”

“You still act young,” Verena said.

Pierce waved her off.

Ilea smiled to herself as she walked toward the piles of till-glowing metal. *Yeah, this is fun.*

“It’s pointing straight forward,” she said, putting away the locator once more.

The long hallway beyond the Centurions was full of traps. Normal Taleen ones she had seen many times before. Her ashen armor was already layered, but she paused and reconsidered, instead summoning her heavy Wyrm armor.

Pierce whistled. “Now that… is something. How much for that piece of art?”

“I don’t plan on selling it,” Ilea answered as she walked into the corridor.

Steel spears shot out of the walls, flames coated her, and bolts clattered against the Wyrm scales, all without effect. The mechanisms set within the walls mostly gave way, with both the steel spears and her armor winning out against the more delicate parts of the construction.

It felt like wading through mud more than walking through traps made to incapacitate or kill intruders. The flames didn’t even register, the heat gathering within her outperforming them by a long shot.

The Elders didn’t seem particularly impressed, simply following her in silence.

If they found a key down here, it would likely reveal quite a bit more about her current objectives, but Ilea found herself not caring much. If anything, getting input from two old adventurers firmly on the side of the Shadow’s Hand might help her.

She trusted Claire’s judgment, especially coupled with her own impression. Pierce was right. If teleportation gates became a reality, there

would be a lot of uncertainties and possible political nightmares in the making.

The same would be true of cooperation with the elves or an extensive conflict with the Taleen. Bringing the attention of these ancient powers onto humanity, even if it was just her, could spell unprecedented trouble. She could use more allies and advice.

They eventually emerged into a room that looked familiar to Ilea. Twelve pedestals were spread out in a half-circle, while various chests and shelves lined the walls.

“Treasure,” Pierce said, not making a move to take anything.

Ilea looked around. There were a few hundred gold pieces, Taleen weapons and armor, and, most importantly, a golden triangle lined with hundreds of enchantments on the pedestals.

This is too easy…

Ilea searched for traps, but the only thing she found was the pressure plate that the key itself sat on. She made an ashen copy of the key and increased its density before she made it hover next to the pedestal.

Displacement failed to bring the key to her, so she walked over to it, taking the artifact before she moved her ash into place. The mechanism wasn’t triggered by the fast switch. Ilea weighed the artifact, then added more density to her ash before infusing it with mana and letting it sit there.

Damn. It actually worked.

“That’s what you came for?” Pierce asked, walking over and looking at the item.

Ilea noted that neither of the women had touched a single thing in the room.

“Yeah. I’ll take the gold too. Feel free to loot the rest,” she said, identifying her find.

[The Brass Key – Ancient Quality] – [Enchanted]

She glanced around, her Wyrm scale armor now covered in ash.

“You seem anxious,” Verena said, looking at a Taleen war axe before placing it back down.

“I just didn’t expect it to be this easy,” Ilea admitted, storing the key at the cost of a considerable chunk of mana.

“Feel like telling us what that was?” Pierce asked, sitting down on a nearby chest.

Ilea displaced the gold onto a bed of moving ash before storing everything through her connection with the element. It came to about three hundred and forty pieces. Not particularly impressive, given her wealth. To a normal adventurer, however, it would be an exorbitant sum.

“I’m not entirely sure I can trust you two with that information,” Ilea answered. “You’re aware of the Cerithil Hunters?”

Let’s see how they react to a few pieces.

The two looked at each other before Verena answered, “Yes. They’re elves who go into dungeons. I met one that didn’t try to kill me.”

“They’re the only ones who don’t attack humans on sight. I’m pretty damn sure about that,” Pierce said. “A good thing too, because many, many more humans would’ve died over the years if we didn’t have dungeons to hide in.”

“The Taleen built the Guardians and more advanced machines to hunt and kill elves,” Ilea explained. “At this point, it doesn’t seem like the dwarves are still around, but the machines haven’t stopped. On the contrary, more are invading the elven domains every year.”

Pierce smirked. “So it’s true,” she murmured. “You’re working with them.”

“I’m helping out a few friends. They just happen to be elves,” Ilea said, gauging their reactions.

Verena took a deep breath, the grip on her axes tightening briefly before she relaxed again.

“Even if we wanted to stop you, we couldn’t,” Pierce said. “I’m highly curious, though… to meet these creatures who think so little of our kind. So little, in fact, that they don’t even invade our lands.”

“They invaded enough,” Verena said.

“Ah, we talked about that many times, Verena. You know they could wipe us out entirely if they wished. Or so I assume?” she said, glancing at Ilea.

“I met a Monarch. The male leader of the Sky Domain. He was a four-mark being,” she said.

Pierce whistled. “Yeah, that would do it. I could probably wipe out a few cities myself. A four-mark, though… that’s entirely different,” she said and laughed.

“Don’t joke about that,” Verena said.

“Ah, you take these things too seriously. There are forces in the world we don’t understand. Not yet. Nor is it wise to challenge them. Could you beat the ones you’ve allied yourself with?” Pierce asked. “Just in case they turn on you?”

Ilea considered the question. She was less concerned about the Hunters and more about the Monarch or other potential high-level elves taking an interest. “I’m working on my skills and Classes. Just in case.”

The woman giggled. “Of course. Well, just be careful. Like calling into the ocean, sometimes you don’t want to find out what’s lurking in the dark.”

“I’m well aware.”

“Good. And Verena, there are records that tell of alliances in the past, did you know that?”

Verena shook her head.

“I’ve heard of one,” Ilea said.

“And what could bring such ancient and beastly creatures to ally themselves with humanity?”

“Bigger monsters,” Verena said.

“Probably. Either that or we were more powerful in the past. Hence the northern kingdoms. The elves would’ve spread and taken our lands by now if they cared. So, what’s the goal of those friends of yours?”

“To stop the machines. That’s what the Cerithil Hunters have been trying to do for centuries,” Ilea answered.

“Now that *is* interesting,” Pierce said with a wide grin. “How extensive is the danger these machines pose to the elven… Domains, you said?”

Ilea thought about it. “Honestly, I can’t really see even an Executioner killing that Monarch. But according to the elves I know, a lot of their young are killed by the Taleen.”

“Oh yes. The chaos that would ensue from the removal of this threat… ah, I can see it!” Pierce spread her arms. “Wonderful. Ah, and here I thought the teleportation gate idea would shatter our status quo, but this… this could ripple far beyond humanity alone. Verena, what do you think?”

“It’s dangerous,” the woman said. “But their arrogance has always annoyed me.”

“Yeah. Me too. Say, Lilith, how many of these artifacts are there?”

“Twelve in total. This is number two,” Ilea said.

Pierce smiled. “Two Elders of the Shadow’s Hand, fighting alongside Lilith. How the bards and historians will write and sing of our deeds! If they’re still alive to spin their tales at all. Ilea… I think it’s fair to say that I’m interested in this endeavor. It may prove a wonderful stepping stone toward my dragon hunt. Even though we can’t offer much help in battle, as you’re quite… ludicrously powerful, we do have friends and favors ready to be collected throughout the human lands.”

Ilea smirked. “I like the sound of that.”

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TWENTY-SIX

Search

"You really want to kill a dragon," Ilea said. "And here I thought people didn't even want to say the name."

Pierce waved her away, crossing her legs as she sat on a chest. "Superstitious folk. We both know every creature out there has its limits. I'm still young, and I'll get me a dragon skull before I retire."

And I'll get one to ride. I might already have enough gold to bribe one. If they're anything like the fairy tales make them out to be.

Still, she assumed the local legends would prove true, meaning dragons were so destructive and mighty that people would rather avoid even mentioning them for fear of getting one's attention.

"Any clue as to their level?" she asked.

"I've only seen three, and only one in battle – far to the north. The ground shook with each of its spells, and its fire was so hot I could feel it from kilometers away. It was as if the very fabric of our realm was burning," she mused, a broad grin on her face.

Ilea chuckled. "Doesn't sound like you want to kill them."

"Ah, you'd understand if you'd seen it."

"What was it fighting?"

The woman shrugged. "I don't know. Probably something that isn't alive anymore."

"You mentioned our realm. Have you been to others?"

"No, but she has," Pierce said and pointed to Verena.

The woman didn’t seem inclined to talk about it.

Ilea didn’t push. After both Erendar and the demon realm, it didn’t seem that strange to her.

Verena crossed her arms. “I want to know more about the Domains and the relationship between them and the Hunters.”

Ilea summoned an ashen armchair and spoke for a few minutes, explaining what she knew of the Domains’ societal structures and their people. The women listened intently, asking the occasional question. Both remained silent for a long moment after Ilea was done.

“Now I’m even more excited to meet these Hunters,” Pierce murmured. “Hmm, yes, yes, yes.”

“Don’t start with politics again,” Verena said.

“I won’t. I promised, didn’t I? But these Domains… They’re so much more diverse than I thought. And their Oracles… I want to meet one of those… Women in power. As it should be. Did you meet one, Ilea? Are you one??”

“No and no,” Ilea answered, summoning a meal. “What did you mean by the politics comment?”

Verena shook her head.

“I ended two wars – it just wasn’t pretty,” Pierce explained. “The involved parties blamed me for some things, which made everyone happy.”

“You murdered a lot of people,” Verena said.

Pierce sighed. “Are you arguing they didn’t deserve it? Or that you would’ve done anything different?”

Verena remained silent.

“Lys is doing better now, same with Asila. But no intervention can change the core root of the issue,” Pierce said.

“Do you know of the Lily?” Ilea asked.

“Yeah, and you do too, it seems… Well, it makes sense with your power and wealth. Helena is the only one keeping all those idiots from slaughtering each other. More than they already are.”

Verena huffed.

“Ironic, yes. With her business,” Pierce continued. “But, well, who knows? The winds might be changing over here.” Then she stood up and clapped her hands together. “What are we waiting for, then? We have more strange artifacts to collect! Can you teleport us out of this place? You brought the man to your house with you, didn’t you?”

“I might be able to use something a little better. My long-range ability is limited,” Ilea said.

“The Taleen gates,” Verena said thoughtfully. “So, you can use them…”

“Yeah. Might be dangerous, though.”

“Dangerous is good,” Pierce said.

Ilea smiled. “Agreed. Let’s find out if they have a working gate here.”

The trio continued their exploration of the small Taleen dungeon. Its design was rather vertical, similar to the Centurion facility, though far less extensive. There was no throne room, nor any production lines. No Praetorians showed up either, only a few more Centurions, who provided little resistance against her magic.

Should I take a few spares for Aki?

She decided to put a few of the defeated machines into her necklace. Just in case.

“These normally explode, don’t they?” Verena asked, looking at the unmoving machine, lying in front of a closed entrance.

Ilea activated a rune near the stone door, having recognized the writing above. “Not if you disable them fast enough,” she said as the entrance slid open.

“They’re not exactly the pinnacle of Taleen engineering, but defeating one is no small feat either,” Pierce said.

Ilea didn’t comment on it. She wondered how she would fare against an Executioner at this point, now that her main Classes had evolved. They were dangerous foes, but her advancements were substantial.

I could probably take one at this point. But the army that came for us back in Iz…

She dismissed the thought, inspecting a Taleen gate ahead of them as they walked into a large hall. Ilea studied the control panel, then inserted the second modified key and selected the destination map.

“We can go to any of those places?” Pierce asked. “Where are we now?”

Ilea pointed vaguely at the floating map. “Somewhere here. This should be close to Dawntree,” she added, pointing at another section.

Pierce whistled, while Verena remained quiet.

“Maybe I underestimated their importance,” Pierce said. “That’s more than twenty times the area humanity claims as its territory.”

“Doesn’t mean they controlled it all,” Verena said.

“Bold of you to assume humanity controls the Plains,” Ilea said in a dry tone.

“Fair comment.”

“You’ve cracked these. Was it you?” Pierce asked.

“No,” Ilea said.

“Then can we assume you have people working on replicating this technology?” Pierce said.

Ilea didn’t really see a way to deny it. It was obvious. And she did trust the two women, simply because of their deep connection to the Hand.

“I do.”

Pierce laughed and smiled brightly. “Yeah. Yeah yeah yeah. I like you, Lilith. And I like what you’ve got going on.”

Verena didn’t comment.

“Teleportation gates. Now that would change everything,” Pierce said. “Goods transported, people reaching new settlements. Adventurers sent out to fight monsters.”

“Your Sentinels,” Verena said.

“And our Shadows,” Pierce added with a smirk.

“Yeah. Great. But where do we go now?” Verena asked.

“Good question,” Ilea said.

Krahen is too far. Maybe halfway? That would probably take us into elven territory. Within a dungeon, that is.

She could see many destinations. The Plains were sparsely dotted with dungeons, as was what she thought of as the northern territories. The desert south of Ravenhall had far more locations, and there were a few more locations to the east, either below the sea or on other landmasses. The west seemed less densely packed, with most destinations bordering what she thought was the Navali Forest.

No wonder nobody knows about the elven plight. The machines are teleported into their very lands.

Similar to humanity here in Elos, Ilea had learned that elves didn’t exactly control the lands they claimed as their own. Either they didn’t want to, or there were creatures too dangerous to deal with prowling the wilderness. Based on what Ben had told her, she assumed it was a mix of both. High-level elves likely had no interest in hunting down every single monster that could be a threat to their young.

“Help me compare,” she said, activating the map on her locator. The arrow pointed back toward the direction they had come from.

The Elders joined in without comment, comparing the maps to see if any more locations were accessible from this gate than from the one Iana and Christopher had used as a basis for the map.

“This section,” Verena said after a while, pointing to the area near Karth.

Ilea had come to the same conclusion. Twice.

“Does that mean…” Pierce said.

“New gates are being built,” Verena said. “And added to the existing network.”

“Not just built,” Ilea said, pointing to a few specific dots. “Destroyed, too. Or disconnected for some reason. Most of them are close to elven territory.”

She wondered if the differences just meant that other destinations were available from the Isle of Garath.

But why would they be restricted from that specific gate and accessible from here? Neither place seems particularly important or massive. They’re both just old ruins.

It seemed more likely to her that these were indeed new destinations.

“There are a lot of new ones in the north, too, and in the Isanna Desert,” Pierce said.

“They did say it’s getting worse each year,” Ilea said.

Though it’s not been long since Iana and Christopher extracted the map. Even if they had a few thousand level five hundred hunters, they’re not fighting against a static enemy.

She imagined Niivalyr and his group in the southern Praetorian facility. The dots connecting to it were so very small on the maps floating next to her.

“Are the machines making more of themselves?” Pierce mused, more to herself than the others.

Maybe if I get another key, I’ll be able to find out more.

“All the gaps… I assume those are elven lands,” Verena said, pointing to the locations in the west. “No new gates have been added here,” she said, pointing to an area far to the northwest of Karth, closer to the Krahen Isles than the Plains.

“Nothing there at all,” Pierce said. “Doesn’t look like there are any advance positions either. The gates just stop and continue again beyond.”

Ilea looked at the sizable area, not finding a single dot. It hadn’t seemed suspicious before because of its close proximity to similar areas likely to be within elven territories. But now, with the changes they had discerned, it did seem a little weird.

“Maybe they’re hiding something there?” Pierce suggested. “No elves are likely to be there.”

“Or they’re destroying all new gates,” Verena said.

“As good as any location, really,” Ilea mused, selecting the gate closest to the open area. “Last chance to stay behind. I have no idea what’s waiting for us on the other side. Executioners are level eight hundred, can run through the air, and have void magic blades, if you need an example of what might be there.”

“You’re joking, right?” Pierce said. “You’d have to render me unconscious or dead to prevent me from staying on this platform. Though I may not be incredibly opposed to the former, depending on your creativity.”

“My interest remains,” Verena said. “But if you insist, I will return.”

“I don’t mind you both coming. But we’re intruding on a teleportation network that isn’t ours. And I might not be able to protect you if we’re detected or stopped,” Ilea said.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I don’t remember asking you for protection,” Pierce said. “If it comes to it, let me die with my pride intact.”

Ilea smiled wryly, knowing she likely would’ve said something similar if their positions had been reversed. Though she didn’t think herself prideful enough to refuse protection.

She took the key and activated the gate. *Let’s see if there’s an Executioner waiting.*

The gate brimmed with magical energy, shifting space to take them to their desired destination.

‘ding’ You have entered the Izculen dungeon

Ilea looked around. Most of the surrounding walls were overgrown with vegetation. Grass and flowers were pushing through the cracks in the floor, while roots were breaking through the brittle stonework all around. The gate

itself must've been better made or enchanted to endure the passing of time and nature's exertions.

She noted the familiar green light she associated with the Taleen was absent. Instead, rays of cool white light shone through large cracks in the ceiling and the frame of the closed stone door ahead.

"Crystals," Pierce said in a whisper. "This seems familiar."

Same as in Hallowfort, Ilea noted, feeling the increased mana density compared to the previous dungeon. They were certainly in the north. It just wasn't usually quite this green.

Maybe it's like the Penumra dungeon? she wondered, checking to see if she could find any living creatures within her dominion.

There were plenty. Insects, a few birds, even a squirrel-like being that rushed away a moment later. The remains of the architecture looked decidedly Taleen, though more brittle than most other dungeons Ilea had visited before.

She could hear the sound of flowing water, so Ilea transferred through the door ahead and onto a bridge leading toward an open space, followed by Verena and Pierce. Her eyes opened wide as she took in her surroundings.

"Beautiful," Pierce exclaimed, her voice full of wonder.

They found themselves in a vaguely cylinder-like space leading deep into the earth. Roots and plants clung to the dungeon's circular walls, while thousands of trees grew from rocky outcrops or the walls themselves, their impossible angles showing the strength and deep reach of their roots.

Crystal growths lined the ceiling and large parts of the walls, their light reflected in the hundreds of waterfalls flowing out from cracks and tunnels, glittering mists forming where the water fell into the depths below.

Ilea wondered if the Ascended had constructed this place, though she saw signs of Taleen architecture pushing through the ivy in various sections, angular stones broken and bested by trees and water, evidence of hundreds or thousands of years of nature pushing back against the imposed control of civilization.

She turned her head to see two blue Wyverns take flight. Their auras had frozen a small stream, but icicles slowly broke off as the flow of warm water from above slowly broke the magical influence. The sounds of shattering ice were lost amid the myriad sounds, flowing water mixing with the calls of dozens of creatures, large and small.

Pierce had a broad smile on her face and sat down on the edge of the brittle stone bridge that jutted out a few meters into the open space, its abrupt end suggesting a violent destruction. The other end was barely visible on the far side of the expansive cavern. A stream of water gushed out of an opening in the wall, quietly flowing over the remains.

Verena didn't seem quite as serene, quickly recovering after being stunned by her first impression and scanning the many openings for creatures.

Ilea leaned against the bridge's ruined stone railing and looked for creatures as well. Everything she saw suggested an idyllic environment, but there was something underlying the wonder that made her feel uneasy. Something about it seemed dangerous, though she couldn't put her finger on it.

She blinked at the sight of a deer staring down at her from a ledge a hundred meters above before bending down to eat some grass. A sparrow landed on a tree nearby, feeding its young with worms it had caught.

"Are we still in the north?" Verena asked in a disbelieving tone.

Ilea was wondering the same thing. The diversity here didn't seem right. Especially the many mundane-looking animals. "We're a long way west, too. Maybe the storms and mists don't reach this far?"

"We won't know until we go up to the surface."

"It almost feels too perfect," Ilea said, checking her mind for any intrusion but not finding anything obvious or subtle. She couldn't discern an illusion, either; the environment felt as natural and serene as the forests around Riverwatch. The Wyverns reminded her of their actual location, as did the ruins and deep abyss below, but it all seemed too peaceful.

"There are a lot of places we haven't been to. Maybe this is just the one where everything worked out over the years?" Pierce suggested.

"You're too idealistic," Verena said. "I suggest we tread lightly." She looked down into the misty depths. "And don't kill anything."

"Really?" Pierce groaned.

"This place is serene in a land we have to assume is the very opposite. It won't cost us much, but if something keeps it that way, we don't have to challenge it before we know what it is."

"Or this is just a nice cavern," Pierce said, looking down into the depths below.

Yeah. I'm not so sure about that.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

Suspicions

“I agree with Verena,” Ilea said. “I’m not sure what my instincts are telling me exactly, but there’s something dangerous about this place.”

“We do not belong,” Verena whispered.

“We don’t belong anywhere in the north,” Pierce said. “You two are the last women from whom I’d expect so much fear.”

“Fear warns you of danger, that’s all it is, and sometimes it’s best to listen,” Ilea pointed out, summoning the locator. It pointed down and to the far side of the cavern. And it was active.

There’s a key nearby. What are the chances?

“Yeah, yeah. But none of us here has the ability to sneak up on a perceptive creature,” Pierce said. “What we *can* do, though, is escape, should we find ourselves outclassed. We shouldn’t waste time on pointless endeavors and focus on our strengths, Ilea. So let’s go find the next artifact. We can just teleport to the next location and see if something’s close.”

“No need. There’s one here. In this dungeon.”

“What? Really?” Pierce said, smiling to herself. “You’re a real treasure hunter. Well then, lead the way.”

“Verena suggested the location,” Ilea pointed out.

She spread her wings and jumped off the bridge, enjoying the cool breeze within the cavern. It felt downright rejuvenating. As she teleported to reach the other side, hiding in a broad fissure with the Elders appearing nearby, she did a double-take.

“What is it?” Verena asked.

“Healing magic. Faint, but it’s there,” Ilea answered.

“Ah, that was that feeling… I wasn’t sure,” Pierce said. “In the air itself.”

“An artifact? Some kind of plant? Or perhaps a being?” Verena suggested.

“It’s extensive,” Pierce said, flying out into the open. “Here as well,” she said, summoning an obsidian dagger and cutting into her hand. “The effect is stronger than my regeneration,” she mused, the cut already healed.

“How quickly do you regenerate?” Ilea asked.

“Quickly,” Verena said.

“What a perfect place to train,” Pierce said.

Just go to the Meadow’s lair…

“Depends on what exactly is causing it,” Ilea said, following the locator as she jumped down, teleporting or using the trees and roots as steps to get closer.

“Here we go,” she said, leaping through a hole in the ancient, broken wall. The air was fresh inside, with vegetation growing despite the lack of light. Roots had broken through most of the buildings, but the Taleen great hall was still recognizable to someone who had visited a few of them.

Ilea led the group toward another tunnel, following her locator, when a humanoid creature stepped out from a nearby building.

Oh.

Pierce had already vanished, lightning flowing on her armor as she reappeared behind the Mind Weaver, her arms spread wide as if to embrace the creature. Verena had remained near the entrance, her axes at the ready.

Ilea appeared between the demon and Pierce, extending a calming hand toward the woman, whose armor was thicker even than Ilea’s heavy Wyrm set. She could feel the lightning flowing through the Elder, most of the power reabsorbed as it slowly traveled through her armor and body.

Pierce jumped back, landing with a heavy impact. “They have mind magic!”

“I’ll kill it if it attacks you,” Ilea answered before turning around to face the demon. Its black, abyss-like cavities stared right into her soul as the scrawny being moved its thin hands, long claws clicking together with unnerving sounds.

“Greetings,” Ilea sent, initiating telepathy.

“You speak a tongue – and through mind, not sound!” the demon said, raising its shoulders slightly.

[Mind Weaver – lvl 228]

Ilea didn’t feel particularly threatened.

“Indeed. You’re too loud. When you talk to humans, you shouldn’t be this intense. Talk like in a whisper, soft and calm,” Ilea explained, now able to send more complex thoughts.

The Mind Weaver hadn’t attacked them so far, not even touching them with mind magic. Ilea had fought enough of them to know that they threw their magic around on a whim. Even Weavy still sometimes used it without reason.

“Like this? I apologize, traveler. I have not met your kind, nor do I know your purpose here. And yet I can feel the mind of a master. One who may not wield our magic but is nonetheless well versed in it.” It bowed, the gesture well executed and only slightly diminished by the rags it wore. *“You may call me Hereven, though my true name I shall retain. You have arrived here in Izculen. May I inquire how you did so?”*

“I’m not sure I can trust you with that information, Hereven. I’m Lilith,” Ilea said, remembering that Weavy had gone on about true names as well when they had first met, though she was fairly certain now that it was just a Mind Weaver superstition. No magic or skill she had seen had suggested true names really had any sort of power over someone. Even so, she still used her moniker. *“Have you come here from the Great Salt?”*

Hereven reeled back. *“You know of my home! Wondrous… Apologies, you do not look like our kind. Are you perhaps one of the Old Ones?”*

“I’m not. But I’ve visited your realm before. And I’m friends with one of your kind,” Ilea explained. *“What is this place? And why are you interested in how we got here?”*

“Yes… yes. You do seem powerful. It is only natural that you have braved the Great Salt. This is Izculen, the home of Audur and those she shelters.” Hereven hesitated for a moment as it took a step back, its claws nervously clicking together. *“Are you… servants of Audur?”*

“We’re not,” Ilea said. *“Why don’t you tell me about this ‘Audur’?”*

“Ash it is you wield… yes… you would not be. Forgive my inquiry. The great being Audur, Guardian of the West, rests at the bottom of this cavern,

deep below unforgiving lands ravaged by arcane storms and walking mists. I cannot leave, for the Guardian does not take kindly to those who dare abandon her generous care."

Interesting.

"Generous care? If you can't leave, it sounds more like a prison. They sound arrogant and controlling."

"You would dare… insult… the winged giver of life?"

"If they're forcing people to stay here, then yes, sure."

"What's going on?" Pierce interrupted, walking a little closer. "You two have been staring at each other for a while. Did it get into your head?"

"We're communicating telepathically," Ilea said.

"Figures. Just wanted to make sure we wouldn't have to escape a brain-dead, mind-controlled Lilith," the woman answered, laughing to herself. Then she shook her head. "Ah, that wouldn't be fun at all. No, no, it wouldn't."

Verena joined them too, looking between the being and Ilea. "My fire is subdued," she whispered, giving the demon a wary side glance.

"Audur does not condone the burning flame," it said, speaking to them all now.

Verena touched her head. "I don't like telepathy."

"I don't think it can communicate differently," Ilea said.

And this Audur sounds dangerous.

"I cannot. But I can hear your words and may fathom their meaning." Hereven turned back to Ilea. *"You are brave to insult her. Foolish bravery it may be, but I welcome it wholly. What would it take for you to free me from this prison? I can offer all but servitude and my life itself."*

"I'd want to get to know you a little more. But I suppose if you don't randomly attack sapient creatures, you'd be welcome in Hallowfort," she said.

And the Meadow would step in anyway if it goes too far.

But we don't have to stop there. If Audur is some local tyrant, we could take them out of the picture permanently, too. Generous care my ass. That's not just fucked up, it's insidious.

"I have learned much about this realm since my summoning many centuries past," the demon continued. *"I merely wish to tread freely. I will not use my magic on creatures that did not provoke or attack me, not beyond my need for nourishment."*

“I’m sure we can figure out the specifics. Shouldn’t be an issue to get you out of here once we’re done. Before that, I’m looking for an artifact that looks like this.”

Ilea formed an ashen copy of the Taleen keys and showed it to Hereven.

The demon hesitated. *“I… advise you… not to take from Izculen that which is not yours to take.”*

“I’m afraid it’s not negotiable. And I know where to find it.”

He’s scared. Really fucking scared. What’s happening in this place?

The demon looked at her for a long moment. *“Very well. That which you seek surely lies within. I will guide you.”*

It rushed ahead of them, floating slightly above the ground.

“Do you know of additional traps or dangers on the way?” Ilea asked.

“There are no such things,” Hereven said, pointing to one of the open entrances.

“What did you learn?” Verena asked, still looking at her axes.

“A being called Audur rules this place and stops creatures from leaving, apparently. Hereven here, at least,” Ilea said. “And we must be in the north – there are supposedly arcane storms and mists up on the surface.” She paused. “I’d like to meet this Audur.”

“What kind of creature is it?” Pierce asked, addressing the demon.

“The winged Guardian rests at the pinnacle of magic. She formed this dungeon through will alone.”

Doesn’t sound easy to deal with. But it might be an interesting fight.

“Be more specific,” Pierce said. “Is it humanoid? Two legs, two arms? Armor, weapons – what kind of magic does it use?”

“It wields the magics of life… and wood, I believe it is called. She is… four-legged, with two wings sprouting from her back. Scales, green like leaves, protect her from all that is and will be. Slitted eyes of gold see all within and without her domain. Horns larger than yours adorn her head.”

The three women remained quiet for a moment as they walked silently through the corridors of the overgrown Taleen ruins. Every section where traps would once have been was broken and destroyed.

“Seems like you might get your chance sooner than you thought,” Ilea said, glancing at Pierce.

Intriguing. And disappointing that it would hold beings captive here.

The woman gulped, a wry smile on her face as she addressed the demon. “Is Audur a dragon?”

“I do not know that word. Audur is Audur. There is none like her,” Hereven said.

“Dragon cult,” Ilea said. “I guess they’re supposed to be vain.”

“Says who?” Pierce asked. “Nobody knows a damned thing about those beings.”

“I have my sources,” Ilea said cryptically.

Well, books and fiction back on Earth. But what I’ve heard so far doesn’t suggest some fantastical being at all. Just someone who desperately needs to be in control and have power over others.

“I have seen… the hunters in the Great Salt, the beings that rest below the endless waves,” Hereven said. *“None of them would challenge her. Of that I am certain.”*

Ilea wasn’t quite that sure. And even if what it said was true, she had helped kill a rather large demonic being above Ravenhall. Back when she had been considerably weaker.

Hereven may be from the Great Salt, but given its level, Ilea doubted it had seen creatures comparable to the Daughters of Sephilon, the Meadow, or the Fae. Time would tell, of course, but right now, she wanted to focus on the key. In case Audur proved too powerful to overcome.

I’ll want to find it one way or another.

The group entered a decrepit Taleen hall. Ilea glanced back and thought that the hallway looked decidedly larger than usual for Taleen ruins. Parts of it were smashed from the traps being set off, but some of the damage seemed unrelated.

“You’ve met her, then?” Ilea asked.

“Indeed. All those who have found their way here or were taken meet with the Guardian, or so it is said.”

“Meaning you’ve talked to her? Identified her? Is she a four-mark? What did she sound like? What did you gauge about her power?” Ilea asked as they followed Hereven and the locator. Both were leading them in the same direction.

“Four uncertainties, as you suggest. She spoke… the tongue of the Salt. The tongue of my kind. Her words seemed well chosen, yet the language, though fluent, felt unpracticed. She spoke to me the way I speak to you. What I felt from her…” Hereven paused for a moment. *“I felt… unworthy.”*

The demon seemed ashamed to admit it. *“It was… overwhelming. To find this realm, to be summoned. I had many things to explore, to learn, to*

experience. The gifts of earth, water, untainted by salt, the light of the suns, plentiful creatures to hunt and eat. How could I not be awed?"

Ilea nodded to herself. The demon realm seemed like a pretty rough spot to grow up in, no matter what kind of being you were. Even the north offered many benefits in comparison.

Four uncertainties. A four-mark, then. And if she can speak, she's sapient, and that means she's on the same level as the Monarch, the Ascended I met, or even more powerful. Annoying. Why are the biggest pricks so often the most powerful ones around, too? At least the Meadow tips the balance back slightly.

Pierce glanced around, pausing for a few seconds before she looked over her shoulder again. "Was she the one to summon you?" she asked the Mind Weaver.

"No. A spirit of dark magic living in these parts sought knowledge from our realm," the Mind Weaver explained. *"They were powerless against my magic. And yet I was stranded, in a place I did not know, that held so many riches."*

"Maybe you wouldn't have ended up here if you hadn't killed that spirit," Ilea said.

"Indeed. I have had time to reflect, Lilith, and I have come to the same conclusion. I regret my actions, but they were reasonable at the time. My only desire for decades upon decades was to escape from the cursed lands of my ancestors. Freedom was what I sought, not cooperation, servitude, or imprisonment. Strife was all I knew. For the concepts taught to me by Audur, I am thankful, but she does not see her own domain as imprisonment, whereas I do."

"A self-aware demon, amazing," Pierce said, again checking to see what was behind her.

"You're scared," Ilea said.

"Yeah. We're talking about a sapient four-mark."

Yeah. Well, I'm just one mark away now.

They came to a large hall, ancient tables and walls only barely recognizable amid the roots, plants, and general rubble. No light reached these sections of the dungeon, yet Ilea perceived a few more hallways leading even deeper into the former Taleen facility.

Ilea recognized pieces of metal on the ground and in the walls, pieces once belonging to Guardians and Centurions. She paused, displacing a

particularly large chunk out from between a few roots. “Hmm…” she mused, looking at it as it landed on the ground with a dull clank.

“Machines… Well, someone must’ve cleared them out. Audur, probably,” Pierce said.

“This is part of a Praetorian,” Ilea said.

“You fought them too, did you not?” Verena asked.

She nodded slowly. “Yes. They’re level six hundred. Have you guys defeated one?”

“No,” Pierce said.

Verena shook her head.

“They detonate, much like Centurions. This part here is from a section close to their core,” Ilea said.

“It’s entirely undamaged,” Pierce observed.

“Yep. Which means it was taken out faster than its self-destruction could activate.”

Could I do that at this point? With my evolutions? With a fully charged Archon Strike at the right time and with the right buffs… probably.

Given the state of this hall, however, Ilea didn’t consider it a deliberate attempt to disable the machine. It looked more like a demonstration of overwhelming power.

“This way,” Hereven said, pushing them deeper into the complex.

Ilea followed.

“Do you know anything about the effect on my flames?” Verena asked the demon.

“There is little you can do in the presence of Audur. She does not condone those of death, fire, and ash,” Hereven said, looking at the Elder before it turned its head to Ilea. *“I suggest we leave the way you came once you have what you desire.”*

“Yeah, I’ll want to meet this maybe dragon one way or another,” Ilea said.

Pierce blinked at her. She sighed and bit her lip, opening her mouth and then closing it again.

“Annoying,” she whispered, flicking her own cheek before a helmet formed to cover her face.

“What is?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I can see why you inspire bards and fighters alike,” Verena said.

Ilea grinned. “I remember you jumping at that massive demon back in Eregar’s Haven.”

“Ah, yes,” Verena said, scratching her cheek. “I had no other choice at the time.”

Ilea raised an eyebrow. *I’m not so sure about that.*

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TWENTY-EIGHT

Audur

“You know quite a lot about this realm. Was that your own research, or did Audur teach you?” Ilea asked Hereven after they had been walking for a while.

Every new hall or room they walked through showed signs of a long-past battle. Nothing more than a few small pieces of Taleen constructs survived, let alone a single working machine.

“I have learned from the Druned. What little they know, they share with those who ask,” Hereven explained.

“The Druned. I have not heard of them,” Verena said.

Pierce seemed preoccupied with checking their surroundings.

“They’re stone golems, but I didn’t know there were any this far north,” Ilea said. “I’d be interested in meeting them, too.”

“Many of those who live here are not born of this environment,” the demon said. *“Though few find their fate limiting. They are safe here. Protected. Predators hunt prey still, but compared to the lands above, Izculen is peaceful. I, too, have shared these views for many years.”*

“Did you try to leave, then? Or ask Audur about it?” Ilea asked. *“She seems intelligent enough to come to a similar conclusion. Especially if she’s supposedly protecting the creatures here.”*

“As I have explained, Audur is above all. A wish to leave her side is seen as either betrayal, deficient self-preservation, or a lack of common sense. I have suggested my desires and, based on her reaction to similar

situations, have to assume that I only am alive today because she thought me inept, unable to understand the dangers of this world and the extent of her generosity."

Above all? Sounds like she's delusional – and incredibly insecure.

"Right…"

They walked into a spacious, unlit hall. Shattered tables and shelves littered the floor, alongside pieces of destroyed machines, similar to the rest of the dungeon. The locator pointed at a pile of metal near one of the walls.

Ilea looked through it using Arcane Dominion and found Taleen swords and hammers, pieces of machinery, and even armor. *No bones,* Ilea noted. *Ah, there you are.* She had found the key at the back of the pile.

"Do you hear that?" Pierce asked, looking at the hall's main entrance. Two more led out to each side.

As Ilea moved a few ashen limbs into the pile and retrieved the key, she blinked her eyes a few times, unsure why the action had felt different.

Almost like my ash was moving through water.

"There's no noise," Verena confirmed in a whisper.

She's right, Ilea thought, listening intently. Some insects were still visible within her perception but unmoving, as if frozen entirely. She stored the key and narrowed her eyes, looking at the fabric all around. She focused on a random sword in the pile, then used Displacement. The spell failed to move the weapon.

Oh. That's troublesome. What's going on here? That's a very complex spell.

"I can't teleport here, which means I can't get anyone out either. Hide," she said to the others, layering her mantle and forming two ashen copies she sent to a nearby pillar. She imbued the ash with commands to hide and, if necessary, to help her or her allies.

The others followed suit, Verena crouching behind a large chunk of rubble and Pierce outright melding with the pile of metal, her armor changing shape to something non-human. Hereven found a pillar for itself.

Ilea started to form heat within her core. She could feel the mana density rise in the next moment, a wave of magic almost visibly flowing into the room. The color of the air changed within her dominion as a large being silently stepped into the hall, crouching as it passed through the large entrance, expanding its body when it was no longer constricted.

It was a dragon, unmistakably. Its four legs ended in claws, and its whole body was covered in scales that shimmered with light within Ilea's dominion. Two long horns jutted out from its skull, angled backward and almost straight. Its maw remained closed as it glanced around the hall with inquisitive eyes, its tail swishing out of the entrance as it moved down the set of steps without a sound.

Then it focused on her.

[Audur – lvl ????]

Its eyes were like molten gold, its scales a dull green. Powerful muscles were visible beneath its scales, though there seemed to be little tension in its body. Veteran failed to discern the creature's power, its level beyond that of even the Meadow.

Even though its wings remained tucked against its back, the creature still reached a height of nearly five meters and was about three times as long – more if one included its tail.

"Who intrudes with ash and fire?" it said in a whispering growl.

Ilea could feel the air vibrate with the words, the sound waves as visible in her dominion as if spells were flowing through the air.

"I'm Lilith," Ilea said. "Greetings, Guardian of the West."

She spread her wings to allow for quick movement, her teleportation still restricted by the strange magic in the air. She focused on Space Awareness to try to get past whatever was blocking her magic.

"A human. So far north, so far… west," Audur said.

Ilea could feel a wave of something wash over her, brushing her instincts. More subtle than a roar. An aura, just barely visible within her perception, but she knew it to be there, among another set of more prominent spells. Her own abilities were like drops in the ocean before her.

Still, she refused to budge, remaining where she stood. As much as it annoyed her, she knew that if it came to a fight, nothing other than her teleportation would do her any good. Not here. Not against this being.

"Rare it is for your kind to reach such heights. With endless greed, you push on. And here, in a land you do not know, you will meet your end… Lilith," it said, as if tasting the name.

"You're the first dragon I've met," Ilea said. "And you immediately threaten my life. That's kind of disappointing, I'll be honest."

“Dragon… your kind once used that name. Long past. Tell me, deviant corrupted by ash, what did you seek within these halls?”

She likes to talk at least, Ilea thought. *That’s good.*

“I came to explore. And what I found are creatures locked up by a so-called Guardian.”

The creature hissed. “Be careful with your choice of words, human.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Why? You’ve already said I would meet my end here. Not much incentive left for me to be polite. Why do you imprison creatures here? With your power, surely you could do whatever you liked.”

Ilea had a hard time grasping what was interfering with her teleportation. The dragon had several sets of auras, each doing different things, each periodically changing. She found that some of them influenced the bits of her ash farthest from her body.

A space magic riddle. It was good that she’d had practice with those.

The dragon growled quietly. “I grow tired of your presence.”

Ilea saw the attack coming, sidestepping the root that broke out of the ground in an attempt to pierce her chest. Ash covered her face as her wings took her upward. “I assume that means you’re not interested in further negotiations?”

“Fight to the end, human. I shall free you of that dreadful magic,” Audur said as a hundred wooden spears formed and shot toward Ilea.

Shit.

Ilea couldn’t avoid them all, so instead she covered her body with wings and ash. “Run!” she shouted.

Each glancing blow shaved off a bit more of her ash, the spears infused with magic. Four more volleys came at her as she perceived flashes of fire and lightning heading for separate exits, the Mind Weaver darting out at a much slower pace.

The second volley pierced her armor, the wooden spears digging into her flesh before they splintered, exploding in a flash of fragments. She felt time slow, her speed increasing considerably as she managed to avoid a thin projectile coming at her eye. Ilea used the extra resilience and speed to move forward, her wings shredded and healed simultaneously, just like her mantle.

She extended her hand as she charged Archon Strike, dozens of roots ripping free of the ground to meet her descent. She released Embered Heart

in a bright cone ahead of her, but it hit an invisible force that blocked and consumed the fires and heat, snuffing out the spell in an instant.

Annoying. Fucking four-marks.

Ilea's third-tier healing remade her body and mantle in the time her speed remained doubled, allowing her to avoid more of the spears. She tried again to teleport but failed to activate either spell. A part of her considered fleeing, but even with the boost, it was debatable whether she could even get out of the hall. Audur's focus was on her.

This isn't close to what the Meadow can do, she knew, which meant the dragon was still just playing with her. That annoyed her even more, but her healing kept the anger at bay. Practically, it meant she'd have more time to figure out the auras.

Ilea burst into white flame, pushing her reverse healing into the dragon as she circled it as fast as she could, dodging projectiles and sending forth burning ash when she saw a window of opportunity.

A few spears shredded through her chest and stomach, and a dozen more in the next wave ripped her apart. She could see the damage being done, each splinter fighting against her tough ash and muscle, scraping at the bones beneath, before she was finally flung aside.

Ilea couldn't move. A large chunk of her skin and muscle had gone, and some of her bones were scratched as white fire burned on her ash and skin. She coughed as her third-tier healing regenerated all of her organs, flesh, and ash, its layers once more protecting her as she stood up, looking at the dragon, which had ceased its attacks.

She breathed out with a sigh. She was pissed off at the sheer power standing before her. Audur was beyond her, without question. But the creature was no space mage.

Ilea rolled her shoulders, still pouring her reverse healing into the creature as she used the time to form some ashen spears, infusing them with heat and setting them ablaze with Flare of Creation.

"Abomination," the dragon said with a vibrating cadence, spears of ash exploding into bright heat and white flames against a barrier of mana. Flare of Creation remained, burning away at the source. "Ash. Fire. Arcane reconstruction and the flames of creation. You have no regard for the natural order," Audur whispered with increasing power, her words shaking the stone hall as more roots broke out of the ground. "Your species was not meant to reach such power. Die now, Lilith."

Ilea jumped back, forming several sets of ashen walls as her fires spread. Embered Heart flashed out in a sphere when the roots reached her, pushing them back for a fraction of a second. She evaded them in the air, flying as fast as she could, now aiming for one of the exits. Roots formed almost instantly to block her way before large wooden lances slammed into her back. Three glanced off against her armor, but another six impaled her, one punching out of her chest.

As she activated Phaseshift, waiting for it to manifest, an ashen copy jumped in to block a spear coming for her head, deflecting the projectile just enough to save her.

Two… one… Ilea thought, still flying toward the wooden mesh ahead, more roots forming below to catch her slowing form. The lances piercing her body splintered with flashes of energy, and one of her legs was torn away as the energy ripped through her flesh, her lungs and heart squashed in an instant.

As she reached the exit, Phaseshift manifested, her momentum taking her through the wooden mesh. *Thank fuck this one still works,* she thought as she passed through the barrier and entered the hallway beyond. Deactivating the spell as fast as she could, she healed her body while remaining in her phased form.

Audur shoved the barrier aside before sending another barrage of wood toward the exit. Most of the projectiles moved through Ilea without impact; the last few she dodged as she returned to normal space. One hit her shoulder, nearly making her fall.

She didn’t pause, moving her wings as her mantle reformed, all her speed pushing her through the corridor and away from the dragon, which was much too large for this passage.

“Commendable…” the creature mused.

Ilea felt an absurd amount of mana form behind her, coalescing as she pushed forward. She formed ash behind her, Phaseshift still on cooldown as she tried again to teleport.

This fucking aura.

She didn’t glance back. She could see the magic coming anyway.

Healing.

Bright green flames filled the corridor, rushing over her flying form like a cool breeze. Time slowed once more as she watched her ash evaporate instantly, the walls around her growing grass and flowers as her flesh

bloated and melted, her eyes exploding. As her legs gave out under her, one eye regenerated to show her the blurred image of her skeletal arm. She used it to drag herself forward.

There was no pain, no hesitation, and her mind went blank for a moment as the fires reached her brain. Then Ilea's dominion returned, her third-tier healing pushing against the remnants of the green flame as she stumbled back to her feet, barely managing to form her ash. She ran on bone and muscle, then on flesh, slipping before she managed to stand again. Her leg didn't feel right, nor did her right hand. It didn't matter.

"Run, little human. There is no escape," whispered Audur.

Ilea glanced back to see the dragon's tail swish away in the direction of the main entrance. She glanced down to see her leg covered in blisters, her foot at an impossible angle. She cursed, removing the leg with an ashen limb before she formed a new one.

I survived. She breathed out slowly. *I thought this would be more fun. A way to test my evolutions against something powerful.*

Ilea stared at the green flames still flickering on the walls, then sprinted forward until she emerged in a vast room. She fell with a crash, her vision blurring again.

Verena was by her side in the next moment, turning Ilea onto her back. "Something's on you," she said, a flicker of flame above her palm lighting up the room before a torrent of fire washed over her.

Ilea reached up, pushing away the Elder's hand and her spell. She could see that half her face was missing, her own healing still regenerating newly forming injuries, and her left eye was gone again.

Have to burn it.

"Step aside," she murmured, ashen limbs moving above her as her weight increased, heat forming within her.

Verena made some distance as Ilea released Embered Heart on herself, coupled with Flare of Creation. Flashes of fiery light illuminated the room time and time again as she burned away the foreign magic, melting the stone beneath her. Finally, the last bits that clung to her burned away.

"She's not following," Verena said from the entrance, gazing toward the hall they'd come from. "I can't teleport, and my fire is still weak. Can you move?"

Ilea sighed, blinking her eyes as she checked her body. "I'm fine. I guess she wants to show us that there's nothing we can do."

She tried to teleport, but the spells still didn’t manifest. Her third-tier Transfer didn’t work either. She made an annoyed sound and sat down to meditate.

“So, is there anything we can do?” Verena asked.

“Can’t fight her. Need to get past her aura,” she said, her eyes closed.

“Dragon aura blocking space. Ideas? Wood and healing,” she sent to the Meadow. Next, she addressed Violence. *“In a bind. Help get us out? Dragon with aura.”*

She had the key. Now they had to get out.

“Violence! Knight. Come. Rescue!” the Fae sent back.

Ilea smiled. *Yeah, add another cool four-mark to the list.*

She refocused on the aura still permeating everything around them.

“Give me that mark you mentioned. I’ll find the others,” Verena said, holding out her hand.

Ilea looked up and obliged.

The Elder burst into flames. “Good luck,” she said with a light smile. Then she flew off.

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TWENTY-NINE

Hunt

Ilea looked through the mesh of magic, trying to find rhyme and reason within the chaos. She could see bits and pieces, and then it all changed again.

"Auras and runes are the same in essence. Open your eyes," the Meadow sent.

She sighed with relief. She had assumed as much, but the Meadow had confirmed it. She could figure this out. No way would she die to the first dragon she encountered.

Not meant to reach this power? I'll show you what I can do, you piece of green shit. You. The Ascended. The Monarchs. And everyone else who wants to be a pain in my fucking ass.

Ilea forced herself to calm down, her entire focus back on the mesh. She sent out a few ashen copies, telling them to stalk the halls and scout out everything. She wouldn't learn anything, but if it occupied Audur for a few more seconds before she decided to find and kill her, it was well worth her time.

She gave her notifications a quick glance.

'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5
'ding' Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3

‘ding’ Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
‘ding’ Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5
‘ding’ Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 30

‘ding’ Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 10
‘ding’ Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 11
‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 14
...
‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 17
‘ding’ Identify reaches 2nd lvl 2
‘ding’ Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 15
‘ding’ Monstrous reaches lvl 3
‘ding’ Spear of Ash reaches lvl 15
‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 23
…
‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 25
‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 21
‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 6

‘ding’ One third-tier General Skill point awarded

Ilea immediately invested it into Wood Magic Resistance. She would’ve used her emergency point anyway, considering the circumstances.

And of course there’s no resistance against healing. Even if it melts your face.

She smiled to herself.

Ironic.

‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1
Wood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1
A connection made between a mage and nature allowed this talent to take root. Facing the force of nature, you grow more accustomed to its effects, your body more resilient to the magic of the forest.

2nd stage: The magic of life and nature. It is concerning how much you have enraged the usually peaceful creatures and mages using this school. Through painfully learned understanding, your body can now absorb a fraction of the life used.
3rd stage: You are a being of death and corruption, having invoked the wrath of Audur. Wood spells and conjurations are less effective and much more costly once they come into contact with your flesh.

'ding' You have challenged Audur, Guardian of the West – 1 Core Skill point awarded
'ding' You have fought a dragon – 1 Core Skill point awarded
'ding' You have survived the Cleansing Flame – 1 Core Skill point awarded

Maybe I should fight more dragons, Ilea thought with a wry smile, getting up when she saw a wooden bird flying down the corridor toward her. She burned the creation with a fully charged blast of Embered Heart, the charred bird falling to the ground.

Can't even fully incinerate this tiny thing. She looked at the smoldering walls all around her before she burned the bird away with another blast. *Is she actively looking for me?*

She could see Verena's mark moving farther away. *"You can send me a message. Once a day, ten words."*

Ilea started moving through the corridors in an effort to both map out the place a little and meet up with the others again.

Did she spot us because this is her domain, then? I wonder if we just made too much noise.

She wondered what else it could be, realization hitting her a moment later.

Hereven found us too. My mental resistance? It must look like a bright shield to anyone who attacks it. Fuck, I never checked if it could be detected by anyone with a smidgen of mind magic to their name.

It was a gamble. If she disabled the resistance, she might very well be taken out instantly by Audur's mind magic, if the dragon possessed it. On the other hand, she couldn't be located by the same means, if that was a thing at all.

I still have one more use of Eternal Sight, which means if my consciousness is about to go, time will slow. Worth the risk, then.

She disabled the resistance and moved on silently. Her Space Awareness, mixed with her Arcane Dominion, took in every change to the auras permeating the entire area.

Leaving their range would be the easiest solution, but it's also what she'd expect. Either that or she thinks we'll go back to the gate. I doubt she'd leave it standing without knowing what it was.

There was plenty she didn't know, but Ilea deemed her best course of action to be her Space Awareness. Nothing other than long-range teleportation offered an easy out. Somehow, she doubted even Pierce could outpace and escape a dragon.

Ilea felt the mana density increase again, her wings stopping her as she twirled and flew into a nearby room. She activated Phaseshift and let herself sink into a stone bed, her body floating down before it was pushed up again slightly when she reached the ground.

Good, didn't float through.

She could see her mana tick down, the cost increasing with each passing second. Ilea could feel the mana in the area increase yet again. Audur was slowly prowling the large corridor she had been in just a moment earlier, and Ilea watched the dragon sniff the air, her sharp claws not leaving a single scratch on the stone floor as she moved.

Audur poked her head into the room, her shoulders too large to enter any farther. She gave a low growl as she scanned the space with her golden eyes. Two seconds passed, and Ilea held her breath despite her phased state.

There it is!

'ding' Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 29

The pattern had repeated. She was sure of it. Her perception turned back to unintelligible mush, forcing Ilea to decipher a new set of combinations. She tried to burn the image into her mind. Its repeated appearance meant the dragon wasn't a master of space magic like the Meadow, unable to create an infinite set of puzzles. Instead, it was using a few on repeat, likely an unconscious process of the spell connected to its aura.

The dragon glanced around one more time, checking the adjacent room before it left, vanishing out of her dominion's range in mere moments.

As Ilea disabled her spell, her body was pushed out of the solid matter before her wings caught her in the air. She checked the hallway and found no trace of the dragon. The local mana density had returned to merely heavy.

Even when she was close, it was nowhere near what the Meadow produces. And yet the source is so much brighter… Is she trying not to kill the creatures that live here?

Using her dominion, she could see many beings, insects mostly, moving around within the dark and damp corridors of the Taleen facility. Putting the thought to one side, she moved her wings quickly, her eyes on Verena's mark in the distance.

They went quite far. Good.

It took her the better part of a minute to reach Verena, flying down many corridors, through broken walls, and down several floors. Both Pierce and Hereven were present, the former badly injured.

"Don't heal me," Pierce immediately said.

Ilea noted that the woman didn't have any visible wounds, but she was in a rather rough state.

"You survived! But… your mind? What happened?!" the demon said.

"I disabled my mental resistance in an effort to hide my presence. She went the other way, but she's quick, and I don't know how long she'll keep this up."

"Until she has finished her hunt."

"We should move toward the open space at the center of the dungeon. I'll be able to avoid her spells easier there and maybe get us out."

"I can sense the vibrations if she's coming toward us," Pierce said. "She's very quiet for her size." Her voice shook slightly, and she gulped as she glanced at the surrounding corridors. "She's coming back."

"Stay calm," Ilea said. Pierce's presence within her dominion was barely visible – magically, that was. "Focus on the vibrations. Tell Hereven where she is, and they can relay the information to us. Or can she spot telepathy?"

"I do not believe her capabilities to be quite as masterful," the Mind Weaver replied. *"It was smart of you to disable your resistance. I believe she lacks the ability to find you through its presence, but we should not underestimate Audur."*

The whole group was on the move again now, with Verena leading the flying companions.

"Teleportation still not working," Ilea informed the others through Hereven.

"Fire subdued. Nearly unusable," Hereven sent. *"Dragon coming, three hundred meters behind us. Hide."*

Everyone spread out, extinguishing their spells. Pierce melded with a dark set of stones, her armor flowing outward. Hereven chose a dark corner and pulled Verena with it, a simple visual illusion shrouding them in shadow. Ilea sank into a piece of furniture in a separate room. She absorbed mana from the vicinity, meditating to keep her regeneration high.

Three seconds later, Audur prowled past, sniffing the air a few times. Ilea watched her glance at the room in which Pierce was hiding, her eyes glowing with power. Then she growled softly and moved on.

She stepped into the next room over, ignoring the corner in which Hereven and Verena were hiding, both floating and holding their breaths. This time, Audur raised a clawed arm, cutting through the stone wall preventing her entry as if using a sharpened dagger on a piece of paper.

Audur moved forward and sniffed the air once more, her claws moving past the various pieces of stone furniture before they came to rest on top of the large stone slab Ilea was hiding in. She had phased into the storage unit itself, the compartments within the slab destroyed and empty, and still it seemed the dragon was set on her location.

Ilea didn't have time to contemplate why that was, instead watching the patterns come and go as the creature's aura shifted time and time again. Audur's claws scraped against the top of the slab, and then she slowly pressed down, cutting into the stone. She could see the magic in the dragon's claws and knew they wouldn't just pass without a trace.

Come on. You trained with a fucking sentient tree. Focus.

As the patterns moved again and the claws approached, Ilea waited with closed eyes.

There it is.

She saw the pattern and slipped through it, right before Audur's claws cut through the stone. As she appeared on the floor above, she could see the dragon's slightly confused expression. The beast growled to itself as it moved on, either entirely ignoring Pierce and the others or failing to detect them.

Ilea now had the issue of there being a floor between her and the others. *“I’m above. Continue toward the center. I’ll move on this floor.”*

“You teleported. You fucking escaped from a dragon! From the lightning woman,” the Mind Weaver relayed, then added,

“Not lightning anymore, Dragonkiller. Yes. I will remember the name. Though perhaps you could stop hiding and show the power of your name?” the demon said, its voice starting to sound a little anxious. *“Stay focused, we haven’t escaped, says fire woman.”*

“Wood in the way here,” Ilea said, coming up on a wall of roots glowing with magic.

“Do not touch it!” Hereven informed. *“Our way is blocked too. If we try to move through, she will know we are here!”*

Ilea sat down and started meditating. *“Stay where you are. Don’t move.”*

A few seconds passed as Ilea watched the aura move and turn, the magic weaving through the fabric of space and everything within it. She breathed out slowly, shivering slightly as she started to unravel a little more, her understanding of what this foe had conjured up growing.

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 30

Displacement activated, and the group appeared beyond the wooden barriers. Ilea saw a flash of magic flare within the wood as they passed through it, and her spell activated again to take the group farther away. As they appeared within the open cavern, a roar resounded from deep within the Taleen facility.

‘ding’ You have heard Audur’s roar – You resist its effects

Ilea allowed herself a grin, forming an ashen copy of herself as she dropped her mantle and wings entirely, disabling her Titan Core and ceasing her heat generation. She sent the copy to the gate room and displaced the group down toward where the dragon’s lair was supposed to be located.

Ilea grabbed Hereven as it fell through the cavern, its body locked by the roar-induced paralysis. She used her spell a few more times, bringing the group safely into a crevice near the bottom of the cavern, where mists covered a handful of light blue lakes. Statues and monuments rose on rocky

islands, distant stone creatures working on various new creations, oblivious to the group's arrival.

Let's hope she takes the bait, Ilea thought, activating her third-tier Transfer.

As the runes started to form, they heard a heavy impact far above. She held her breath. Two seconds later, she felt her ash vanish. Then another roar echoed through the cavern – this time from farther away.

Ilea breathed out. Audur had gone the other way, giving them all the time they needed. The spell took hold, and the fabric of space shifted before they all appeared near the Valley of Carnage on the Krahen Isles.

We got out… But just in case that green thing can follow us…

"Come to the Taleen gate on Krahen. Now. Emergency," she sent to Feyrair and Neiphato.

The two weren't far away – Feyrair's flying dragon form was already visible even as Ilea charged her wings and grabbed the others, making for the dungeon with all haste.

"A short detour. Just in case she can locate us through my spell. Two allies will join us shortly. Don't attack anything."

Don't underestimate dragons, she told herself. *Especially not when they have anti-teleportation auras.*

As they neared the dungeon and Ilea got the key ready, the two elves appeared nearby.

"What… who?! Another dragon?!" Pierce exclaimed.

Feyrair hissed as he returned to his elven form. Neiphato bowed respectfully to the two women and the demon. The latter was still paralyzed as they all moved into the dungeon.

"No time to explain. Get on the platform," Ilea said, slotting in the key and selecting a random destination somewhere in the north, far to the east of Audur's domain. She activated the gate and removed the Krahen Isles from her third-tier Transfer destinations. It might've been a bit much, but she didn't want to risk it. She didn't know if even the Meadow could stop that thing.

The gate came to life and moved the entire group into a dimly lit Taleen dungeon.

Hereven stumbled forward, making a few gurgling sounds as it fell to its knees. *"I'M FREE!"*

Verena and Pierce raised their hands to their ears, Neiphato hissing at the sudden mental assault.

“Quiet, demon,” Feyrair said as he looked at the group. “Are we safe now? I was in the process of hunting a four-mark,” he said, spreading his arms in an annoyed shrug.

Ilea sighed and rolled her neck. “We were fleeing a dragon. You tell me if we’re safe.”

And I’ve just got to five hundred, too. Man, that’s annoying. But I guess it’s fair. Can’t go from a Wyrm to a dragon this quickly.

The dragonling hissed, glancing at the group before he turned to the gate. “We should destroy this.”

“She’s way too large to use that t—”

The gate suddenly flickered to life once more.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Ilea said. “Get ready, we’re leaving.”

She prepared to displace herself and the whole group as far away as she could, then stopped and blinked her eyes, looking at the being that appeared on the platform.

[Pursuer Praetorian – lvl ???]

The Praetorian variant was smaller than an Executioner, and its silver carapace shimmered in the dull light.

“Intruder detected,” the creature said in a distorted mechanical voice, its eyes glowing a bright green as it aimed two cannon-like extensions at Ilea.

“Oh. That’s better. I think.”

Ilea sighed as part of her torso was blasted away by a steel projectile the size of her head. She twirled in the air and landed on her feet, her mantle spreading as her Wyrm armor appeared around her.

Dragon? No. Not yet. Pursuer? Definitely. And just when I needed it, too.

Heat gathered within her as her weight increased.

“Welcome to…”

‘ding’ You have entered the Izlental dungeon

“…Izlental,” she finished as she ran at the machine.

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THIRTY

Wormholes

“Nice to meet the two of you,” Neiphato said over the sound of stone breaking a few dozen meters away. He hoped Ilea didn’t bring the cavern down on them.

“She wasn’t this on edge even against the Wyrm,” Feyrair said. “You really fought a dragon? Is she really that stupid?”

“Nice to meet you, too, Cerithil Hunter,” one of the women said. Her body was clad in fire, and simple armor covered her legs and torso.

“You know our kind?” Neiphato asked. “That’s fortunate. I hear it’s difficult to form relations with humans because of our rather… problematic pasts.” He tried to smile in a disarming way. It seemed to have the opposite effect. “I’m Neiphato.”

“You’re an actual elf… A real-life elf who isn’t gurgling up some bullshit about killing and eating me? How interesting,” the other woman said, leaning forward until her face was a hand’s breadth from his. Her entire body, save for her head, was covered in dark armor that occasionally had lightning traveling over its surface. She moved over to Feyrair.

“Get away from me, human, or I *will* eat you,” Feyrair said, pushing her back.

“You dare talk to Dragonkiller Pierce in that tone, young elf?” the lightning woman said, giving him a broad smile that showed her teeth.

Feyrair hissed, white flames flaring to life across his body.

“Stop it,” Neiphato and the burning woman said at the same time.

“You’re no threat to me, let alone to a dragon,” Feyrair hissed. “But you can try, human.”

“Oh, I think I will, elf.”

The lightning mage vanished, reappearing a few dozen meters away in the expansive hall before beckoning Feyrair closer. The elf obliged, his flames spreading out as he jumped up.

Neiphato glanced at Ilea’s burning form. A beam of heat and energy was enveloping the fast-moving Praetorian variant, the like of which he had never seen before. He knew she would ask for help if she needed it. The being was only a three-mark, after all, the same as her.

The demon they had brought currently wasn’t using its mind magic to attack anyone but instead seemed to be crying, touching the stone floor with its clawed hands. And it had appeared here with Ilea, so he assumed she had somehow managed to befriend it.

Feyrair and the Dragonkiller woman were in a full-on battle by this point, the latter using her fast speed and teleportation to keep up with the much higher-level elf.

The woman next to him cleared her throat. “I’m Verena. Elder of the Shadow’s Hand. Good to meet you – Neiphato, was it? I hope your friend isn’t going to kill mine.”

He looked at her and hissed, embarrassed. “I also hope he doesn’t.”

She squinted at him.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine. You two seem to be capable warriors,” he said, raising his hands in a placating gesture.

“Will *she* be fine?” Verena asked, motioning toward Ilea.

“Oh yes. I’ve seen her fight a Scorching Wyrm. I think she could take a few Executioners alone at this point. We should just be on the lookout in case her head gets skewered again.” He scratched his chin as he watched Ilea fight. “Her new armor seems well-suited for the job.”

“I didn’t know it was new,” Verena said. She summoned a bottle and started drinking. “Ale?”

“Ah, the human brew. If you’re willing to share, though I have nothing to trade with you.” As he received a bottle, a thought struck him. “Ah! There is something,” he said, forming a white flower surrounded by a spiral of wood. “It would complement your hair and tanned skin, I believe,” he said with a bright smile.

“Th… anks,” Verena said slowly, extinguishing her fires as she received the flower with a complex expression that Neiphato couldn’t discern.

The lightning woman was laughing maniacally, streaks of blue light flashing behind them, and Feyrair joined the laughter, his white flames cutting through stone.

He probably *won’t kill her…*

* * *

Ilea circled the Taleen machine. The variant was as quick as the Executioners but considerably more cautious, trying to keep its distance as it used its cannons to shoot at her.

She displaced herself behind it, punching the machine a few times with Archon Strike and Tempered Seal. Her abilities burned into its already weakened shield, its regeneration unable to keep up with her massively enhanced mana intrusion.

Ilea watched it charge its cannons, purple energy flashing before it shot chunks of metal at her. She charged forward, and though the void-infused projectiles hit her mantle, ripping out chunks of her ash and lightly damaging her Wyrm armor below, they failed to slow her down.

Her footsteps were loud and heavy as she ran, a grin on her face as she jumped at it. As the Pursuer leaped away, stepping on fields of mana hovering in the air, Embered Heart was released in a sphere, and its shield shattered against the powerful surge of heat.

Ilea stopped her pursuit, her weight falling as she charged her heat. She stored her heavy armor and looked at the creature, dodging two fast-moving projectiles that tugged at her mantle in passing. Her Void Magic Resistance was much too high for them to do any considerable damage.

She felt space magic manifest to her right and turned, displacing the next few projectiles into the nearby walls as she eyed the wavering fabric. When she felt the mark move within her perception, her smile broadened.

Violence appeared clad in dark armor, white eyes shining behind the visor of his mismatched helmet, a sword of black steel held in its hand as it floated toward the Praetorian, the point of its blade aimed forward. A small white cape fluttered in non-existent wind on its back.

Ilea dodged two more projectiles with quick sidesteps and laughed, waving at her friend. “You’re late.”

Late?

No.

Dragon.

It pointed at the machine.

Blind?

“I’m not blind. We escaped already. This one appeared afterward. Feel like joining in? I think it just realized its ranged attacks won’t work on me.”

She watched as the Pursuer’s cannon arms molded themselves into blades, much like those of the Executioners. The machine was also using the lull in battle to regenerate its shield.

Yeah, that should be quite a bit more dangerous, she mused. *I wonder if it will still be able to pierce my armor quite as easily.*

Violence appeared on her shoulder.

Danger?

“No. We’ll be just fine,” she said, walking toward the machine. She spread her wings, and a dozen burning spears formed behind her.

Much more comfortable than a fucking dragon.

The two rushed at each other, with explosions of heat and fire slamming into the machine’s shield while its blades cut into her armor. Ilea laughed, letting the variant strike her. She moved her body to prevent serious damage, and though the void blades cut deep into her mantle, they couldn’t reach her skin.

Ilea got in close and punched the being several times, its shield already overloaded again. She remained where she stood, healing the cuts in her ash as she watched the machine jump back, its unfeeling green eyes staring at her.

Yeah. I think I can take on Executioners now.

Switching its blades back to cannons, the Pursuer began charging its own attacks when a bright beam of flame and heat slammed against its shield, fire spreading to the side and lighting up the ground. As the shield shattered in brilliant purple fragments of light and magic, the remainder of Ilea’s spell burned into the machine’s chest.

It jumped back when the beam subsided, silver metal dripping to the ground. A small part of its core was exposed, though the damage was already slowly regenerating. Ilea aimed at the fast-moving Pursuer and sent another beam at it, but her spell missed. She displaced the void metal

projectiles that it sent at her, sending them right back at it. It dodged those, too.

The Pursuer was about fifty levels above a normal Executioner, but aside from its ability to shoot projectiles, it didn't seem vastly different.

Maybe it has inherent knowledge of how to use the gates. Or was it sent here by the One without Form?

Finish? Violence asked.

"Bored already? Yeah. I guess this fight is pretty easy. But I just faced something I couldn't even touch."

Understand.

"Do you know her? Audur was her name."

Audur.

Maybe.

Ask.

Others.

The Pursuer was back on the offensive, charging at her – only to be pushed back by a chaotic blast of fire released from her outstretched hand.

Ilea appeared close to the Pursuer to deliver a fully charged Archon Strike. Explosions of flame rattled through its shield from her earlier Tempered Seal, and white fire spread onto its now unprotected silver armor.

She used her ash to try to cut into its legs but failed to get deep enough, so she used physical Archon Strikes to demolish its limbs. The machine's close-quarters evasion was wholly inadequate against a small target like Ilea. Her arms soon ached, ash and flesh stripped from her knuckles as she raised her fists again at the immobilized piece of machinery, its limbs now heavily dented.

One of its arms morphed into a rapier-like extension and sped at her eye. Ilea turned her head slightly to deflect the point, raising her arm before another blast of heat burned away its head and torso. She reached in with ashen limbs to pry out the core even as her Embered Heart continually pushed against the roiling metal within.

The core had another shield protecting it, but for now, she just moved it away from the silver metal on the ground, most of which lost its form as soon as the core was sufficiently far away. She couldn't displace it, but a simple jump, coupled with her wings, brought the same result.

"I annoyed the dragon. And we took one of her captives from her. Do you think she would come and hunt me down for that?"

Proud.

Maybe.

Leave.

Home.

Unlikely.

“You think so? I’d feel pretty guilty if this blew up and Audur destroyed all of the human lands. Even though I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

Other than taking the key, maybe. Though if anything, it belonged to the Taleen.

Human.

Lands.

Low.

Mana.

Angry.

Yes.

Probably.

But.

Low.

Mana.

Dangerous.

“I see. But she could go there if she really wanted to?”

Yes.

Painful.

Slow.

Death.

“Okay. That’s good to know. Guess it makes sense that the Plains are still mostly human-dominated when there are creatures like that out there.”

The Fae giggled and hugged her face from the side.

Survived.

Dragon!

Ilea smiled, sending a wave of fire over the newly forming silver, making sure not to detonate the core.

“Yeah. Thanks to my Fae Class. My space magic pulled through. I guess I shouldn’t be too annoyed that I couldn’t beat an ancient dragon in battle.” She looked at the Fae. “Not that I had to worry at all. You were on your way.”

Truth!

Ilea checked the few messages she still had pending, absentmindedly keeping the Pursuer's core exposed. She hadn't exactly planned to try this right now, but since the opportunity had presented itself, she wouldn't say no.

'ding' You have escaped Audur's domain – 1 Core Skill point awarded

'ding' Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 3

'ding' Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 30
'ding' Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 29

I guess the danger helped with my skills at least. Just one more level and Space Shift is maxed too.

"Ilea, can you make sure he doesn't kill her?" Verena asked from a few dozen meters away.

Feyrair stood over a charred Dragonkiller, her murmured insults failing to inflict the damage she hoped they would. He looked downright triumphant. It was a good look on him…

Hmm. Interesting. That might be a nice distraction from… everything.

Not something to think about now, though. And I'm not in the headspace for anything… intimate.

"He won't kill her," Ilea said, going back to her notifications.

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 18
'ding' Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 26
'ding' Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9

We didn't just escape, though. I found the third key.

She summoned it, finally inspecting the thing.

[The Silver Key – Ancient Quality] – [Enchanted]

And the One without Form helpfully let me know that three keys would make me a real Key Warden. Which might answer a few questions. And will surely pose some new ones, too.

She stored it again, using a chunk of mana to make the key find its place within her storage necklace.

Intricate.

“Yeah, it’s from the Taleen. Same as this thing here,” Ilea said to the Fae, pointing at what was left of the Pursuer, now merely a sphere held up by roiling silver metal attempting to reform its skeletal shape.

Destroy?

“No,” Ilea smiled. “There’s something I’d like to try.”

She tried to displace the core once again, failing in the endeavor once more, but the attempt wasn’t entirely without progress. Before her encounter with Audur, she might’ve given up, but what the Meadow had said, coupled with what she had achieved against the dragon, made her persist.

Everything was connected to the fabric, and every spell that affected it, or protected its framework from her spells, was the same in essence. Using the spell a few more times, she could discern the enchantments preventing her from moving it. They were etched somewhere into the core, but they weren’t overly complex in nature. Certainly nothing that changed as frequently as Audur’s aura.

Compared to figuring out the dragon’s spell, this puzzle was manageable.

“Hmm, think someone could track this being?” Ilea asked the Fae.

No.

Mark.

“I can’t see anything either.” She glanced at the others. “Come gather round, children. We’re leaving this dreadful place behind.”

“No more of the artifacts around that you sought?” Verena asked.

“Haven’t checked,” Ilea answered. She summoned the locator and activated it. “Nope, just a direction.”

“Not quite as lucky this time,” Verena said with a light smile. “What level is that thing anyway?”

“Eight fifty. Keep some distance. The detonation when it’s destroyed is quite… extensive.”

She sent another blast of fire at the pile of regenerating silver.

“Verena, why didn’t you save me?”

Ilea looked around to see the lightly charred form of Pierce approaching them. The woman was wearing half-burnt rags.

“Dress yourself,” Verena said with a hiss.

“My state of dress reflects my tragic loss. Elvenkind really are superior to my weak self,” she said, cowering dramatically.

Nobody seemed to fall for it.

“Where is it you would take us?” Hereven asked, now joining them too. Its tone of voice suggested that it had missed what had transpired earlier or that it simply didn’t care.

The unfazable, Ilea thought. *Guess that comes with living in the Great Salt – and in Audur’s domain.*

“I hadn’t planned for all of you to meet already, but I think it’s fine,” she smiled. Verena and Pierce had worked together with her, the former even helping her out when her life was on the line. And now that they had met the elves, it really did seem like they were Shadows at heart. “I need a bit of time to breathe, and I want to try something with this Pursuer. There’s only one place where that seems feasible right now.”

“Your house?” Pierce said.

Ilea smiled and activated her third-tier Transfer once more. She connected everyone to it, including the regenerating Pursuer core that had so helpfully been given into her care.

Pierce was back in her black armor, lightning flowing through her as she sighed. “What a humbling day. Let’s hope tomorrow brings a few more creatures like that! My skills haven’t grown like this in years.”

“Who are you, anyway?” Feyrair asked.

“I told you. Dragonkiller Pierce, Elder of the Shadow’s Hand, and your undoing. In a few decades, that is,” she said, but from her tone, it seemed like even Pierce needed a break after today.

The elf hissed. “I like you.”

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THIRTY-ONE

A Short Rest

The group of unlikely companions materialized from thin air within the domain of a crystal tree. Their faces filled with awe as they looked around at the domain's inhabitants.

"A whole gaggle. Wonderful," the Meadow said. *"I'm glad you made it out. Pursuers?"*

"Just the one," Ilea said, holding up the core. *"Can I leave it in your care for a little while? Don't damage it too much; just get rid of the metal forming around it from time to time. Or you'll have a hostile level eight fifty machine on your hands."*

"What a curious find. I will take great care of it," the Meadow said, teleporting the core closer with its space magic. *"And you've improved again, Ilea. Quite a feat to affect it with your teleportation."*

Ilea smiled. *"It's good to see you. That dragon was something."*

"I'm sure it was. And I'm sure you'll find a way to beat it."

"Maybe."

She glanced at her group. "Verena, Dragonkiller, Hereven – meet the Meadow. A good friend of mine, scholar, charismatic teacher, and protector of Hallowfort."

"Care to tell us what happened now?" Feyrair asked.

Iana and Christopher joined the gathering. "A Mind Weaver?" Iana asked.

“Indeed… yet you do not need to fear me,” Hereven said mentally, but for all to hear.

“I don’t,” Iana said, glancing over at the Meadow. “What’s that sphere?”

“Can you inform them about everything?” Ilea asked, glancing at Verena with a tired expression.

“Of course,” the woman said. “Go take a moment.”

Ilea smiled, displacing herself closer to the Meadow. Only Feyrair would be able to get that near the tree, but he was listening intently to Verena’s retelling of the day’s events.

“That close?” the Meadow asked when Ilea leaned against it.

She sighed, summoning a meal. *“It’s not just that. It felt frustrating. She was no warrior, that one. She’s dangerous. Essentially keeps those under her locked up. And it felt like she enjoys the power she has over her domain and everyone in it. It goes against everything I believe in.”*

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It felt like meeting the Monarch again.”

“I understand. Know that here, you are safe.”

“Yeah. Probably, though I think she was an even higher level than you. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

“You will meet more creatures like her if you continue on the path you’ve chosen,” the Meadow said.

“Yeah. But I won’t stop.”

“No. You won’t. And not all those you will meet will be your enemies.”

Ilea smiled and slowly calmed down.

She looked at the shimmering silver sphere. The metal was forming at a faster pace now, perhaps due to the high mana density close to the Meadow. The tree cast barriers that prevented it from taking form.

Violence appeared nearby and floated over to them, glancing at Ilea before it came to rest on her hair. They remained there in silence for a few minutes, Ilea slowly finishing her plate before she stored it.

* * *

“I’m telling you, this tree wasn’t here the last time I came here. How could I have missed something that obvious?” Pierce asked.

Feyrair shrugged. “Your eyes probably aren’t the best, being human and all. I wouldn’t expect you to notice the obvious.”

“Shut it, elf,” she said as lightning crackled around her.

As they went at it again, the Meadow moved them both under a domed barrier, cutting off all sound within.

“Just make sure to give them some privacy once they start fucking,” Verena said.

Ilea gave Verena a glance as she rejoined the group, this time with Violence in tow.

Am I jealous?

No. Anything with Fey would feel too… close right now. And Dragonkiller is hot, but she’s way too… intense for my taste. Hope they have fun.

“Ilea, you found more keys! But more importantly, can we look at that core?” Iana asked. Christopher was nodding along next to her. “And I assume you plan to bring Aki here?”

“Of course. That was the whole point. I’ll get him shortly,” Ilea said. She looked at the hovering sphere and sighed, then smiled.

If this works, the Sentinels will get an even more impressive instructor.

“You’ve recovered two additional keys,” Neiphato said. “Which means we could learn more from the One without Form.”

“Yes. But I’m not ready to go to Iz yet. I want to work on my third Class some more. We could meet up with Niivalyr’s group and help them work through the Praetorian facility.” Ilea considered the idea. “Or I could look for more keys. I don’t think there will be a dragon waiting next to all of them. Though I don’t plan to use the Taleen gates for a while.”

Neiphato hissed. “The Pursuer…”

“Yeah, and there could be more traps. If they decide to send a whole army after us, it won’t be quite as simple. Our usage of the gates hasn’t gone without notice.”

All the more reason to get our own gates working.

“We can modify the key. But there’s no way to make your passage completely invisible,” Iana said.

“I’ll just fly. I’m pretty quick,” Ilea said. “And I’ll go alone. If Verena and Pierce want to join again, I can grab you once I find something, and we can go in together. Otherwise, I’ll have to carry you around, and I’m not keen on traveling alone with Pierce.”

“That’s fair. I’d like to join. You can teleport those distances, then?” Verena said.

“I have two destinations free to set, yes. I can leave you here or in Ravenhall. If you want to keep the mark, I can let you know when I find something.”

Verena nodded. “I wondered about that. I’ll keep it for the moment. And Ilea, thanks for getting us out of there. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have managed it without you.”

“Yeah, I’m glad we got out, too.”

“Does this mean the Krahen Isles are off limits now?” Neiphato asked. “You think this Audur will be able to find them?”

“Who knows what she can do?” Ilea answered. “Or, more importantly, what she’s willing to do? She’s got her domain to protect, and I assume she’ll take that seriously. But yeah, we’ll have to find you some new hunting grounds. Sorry about that.”

“It’s understandable, given what happened. Do not worry. We should contact Isalthar and let him know you’ve found more keys. Whenever you feel ready to return to Iz, I assume you won’t wish to do so alone?”

“No. Let him know I have three keys, and then we can discuss if there should be further steps. Do you have a way to contact him or Seithir?”

“Nothing quite as impressive as your marks, but we can leave messages in designated dungeons within the Navali Forest,” Neiphato explained.

“Good. Do you need a lift?”

The elf smiled, showing his sharp teeth. “I wouldn’t say no.”

“Great. I’ll let you know when I’m ready to leave, then.”

“In that case, I shall train.”

As Neiphato headed over to the Meadow, where roots formed around him in a sphere-like constellation, Hereven slowly approached Ilea.

“Is this the place you mentioned?” the Mind Weaver asked. *“I am inclined to offer you my services for the life you saved and returned, though I mustn’t.”*

“You’re free now, Hereven. Talk to the Meadow, and I’m sure you can figure out if you want to stay here. You could maybe become a mind magic teacher of sorts – for compensation, of course.”

“Compensation?”

“Yes. Currency and things like food and a safe place to stay and call your own.”

“It sounds… acceptable,” Hereven said. *“And yet what could I offer to one such as you?”*

“Not all humans are like me,” Ilea said. *“Very few, actually. Mind Weavers are masters of mind magic. And I’d love it if the Sentinels had a Mental Resistance trainer.”*

“I will discuss this with the Endless Meadow and consider your words.”

Ilea smiled. *“Do that. And if you decide to just use Hallowfort as a base and leave to explore, or if you want to leave, period, that’s all fine.”* She blinked her eyes. *“Oh. I forgot Weavy! There’s another Mind Weaver from the Great Salt that we brought back with us.”*

“Oh.”

“You don’t seem thrilled.”

“It is just that... usually, we were in competition. It was always dangerous to approach others of my kind.”

“I see. Well. I could introduce you two, if you ever want. He’s staying with a bunch of necromancer and dark magic friends of mine, so that’s another option. Just think about it.”

The Mind Weaver bowed slightly. *“I will. Thank you. And thank you for taking me with you.”*

She gave him a nod in response and stretched slightly, watching the demon float away.

The Meadow’s den had grown in the past months, black grass slowly spreading through the extensive cavern between Hallowfort and the Descent. Massive pillars had been erected to increase the stability of the structure, sitting about two-thirds of the way down the massive statue carved into the stone cliff below the northern stormscape.

The view wasn’t quite as impressive as from Hallowfort itself, which was at the very top of the cliffs and only about a hundred meters below the cavern ceiling, but still, it was impressive to behold. Crystal light flowed through a large opening that the Meadow had added, its magic permeating the very walls as it slowly became a part of this territory.

And while the place had once been an empty field of black grass and pillars, it had now become quite lively. On one side of the den, Goliath worked on his creations, his smithy sprawling out with new additions. On the other side was the pyramid-like structure where Iana and Christopher worked on their research, studying the Pursuer sphere.

Amid them all, the barrier dome containing Feyrair and Pierce remained active. The Meadow had provided them with a considerable amount of

space to continue their bloodbath. To one side, Verena was on the floor stretching, while Neiphato was meditating.

When she felt ready to go, Ilea checked in with the others. Verena and Neiphato would join her, while the rest would remain for the time being. She noted that Violence was nowhere to be found again, the mark on it unclear. She informed the others that she was leaving, then focused on her anchor near Karth and activated her third-tier Transfer.

"Safe travels," the Meadow sent.

"Thanks. Let's hope I run into slightly less interesting creatures," she sent back with a smile.

* * *

The group appeared on a hill overlooking Riverwatch, a few birds taking flight at the sudden manifestation of magic and sound. Ilea stretched, happy for once that the Plains had such low mana density.

So many high-level creatures far beyond my abilities. And instead of catching up, I just find more of them. Frustrating.

"They've strengthened the walls," Verena observed.

Ilea looked at the fortifications. "Have they?"

A little higher, maybe?

"Understandable with the recent attack from Harken, I guess," she added.

"Yeah," Verena said. "And the elves."

Neiphato looked away and sighed.

"I didn't mean it like that," the Elder said quickly. "It's just that few humans can fight elves."

"I understand," Neiphato said. "I'm sorry, for what it's worth."

"You don't need to apologize," Ilea said. "Let's hold the people accountable who actually come and attack settlements. Or don't care that it happens."

"I'm sorry, Neiphato," Verena said. "Old prejudices."

"I appreciate those thoughts," Neiphato said and hissed. "I will let you know when I have sent the message."

"Or when you run into trouble," Ilea said. "The mark is there."

The elf smiled, showing his sharp teeth. "I will try to be careful."

Advising an elf to call for me to rescue him through some mark I left on him… wild.

Ilea looked down at Riverwatch and thought back to the caravan that once took her to Salia, to the elves she'd met and fought there. It felt like a long time ago.

Now. Ravenhall and Aki.

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THIRTY-TWO

Upgrades

The two flew southward, Verena easily resisting the high velocity.

Now that I think about it, I still haven't seen her take an actual hit. How tough is she? Pierce seems mostly focused on speed and teleportation, coupled with her thick armor. But I can see Verena's skin, and her magical armor is just a bunch of fire.

"You're a berserker, right?" Ilea said, slowing down as they reached the southern mountains, her charged wings not exactly providing an environment for a leisurely chat.

The woman just looked at her.

"I just… haven't seen you fight much, and you don't wear any fancy armor. Despite your level and access to smiths."

"I'm not as impressive as you," Verena said. "Getting injured helps," she added by way of explanation.

"I see. I guess you just don't strike me as the berserker type."

She thought of Roland. *He wasn't really like that either. Like what, exactly? Angry? Not sure what I'm expecting.*

"Hmm." Verena wore a light smile as they flew past a distant Morhill, the city a lot busier than the ghost town they'd left behind after the demon summoning.

She knew that Balduur and the people of Indur were involved, as were hundreds of newcomers from the Plains, from the former Kingdom of Baralia, from Lys, from the western cities… It was part of Ravenhall now,

though she had no idea how that actually worked. A vassal, maybe? Or just an extension, given how close the two cities were geographically.

They reached Ravenhall a few minutes later, merchants and travelers glancing up at the two flying adventurers with interest. They landed in the snow a few hundred meters from the city as a courtesy to the guards and their high-level teams, who had to intercept flying arrivals. And it would avoid setting off alarms if they rushed past their magical detection barriers.

“You think it’s enough?” Verena asked as they trod through the snow, quickly reaching the well-traveled road, where the ground was merely mud and ice.

“The walls, you mean?” Ilea asked.

“Yeah. I don’t think they could stop a dragon.”

“No, I agree. Let’s hope the low mana density keeps the real monsters away. That seems to have worked for a long time. Otherwise, all human cities would just be rubble at this point.”

Verena gave her a wry smile. “Probably.”

When they reached the gate, a guard greeted them. “Lilith. And Elder Quil,” he added, a smile on his face as he gestured them into the city. “Welcome back.”

A few people around them started murmuring, watching the two nondescript adventurers as they joined the flow of people behind the outermost wall.

Once inside the city, Ilea transferred them into the Sentinel headquarters. Two Sentinels appeared a moment later, clad in stonehammer steel and bone armor.

One of them removed their helmet and smiled. “Lady Lilith. Welcome back,” the young man said and bowed lightly, his colleague mimicking the gesture.

[Battle Healer – lvl 152]
[Battle Healer – lvl 143]

“Nathan, Ford. Good to see you. That’s some impressive progress. I’m proud of you,” Ilea smiled.

“Formidable,” Verena said. “Makes me wonder if the Shadows will remain the best-known export from Ravenhall.”

Ilea gave her a glance.

“Thank you,” Nathan said. “It’s not quite as impressive as yours, I’m sure. We’re supposed to register any guests.”

“I’m Elder Quil of the Shadow’s Hand,” Verena said.

“Is Trian around?” Ilea asked.

“He should be in his office, Founder,” Ford informed her.

She let them be and gestured for Verena to follow her, leading her down toward Trian’s office.

The few Sentinels they saw greeted Ilea and her guest. She felt pride welling within her as she watched the high-level healers go about their daily business, training and eating together, many already going out on missions.

“I’m liking what I’m seeing,” Verena said when they reached Trian’s office.

“They’re doing good work, yes. Have you met Trian already?” Ilea asked, knocking on the door.

An enchantment lit up within her perception, magically opening the door. Trian was sitting behind his desk, making a few documents vanish as he smiled at his guests.

“Trian Alymie,” Verena said. “I had my suspicions after what happened in Virilya. And knowing he was part of your team.”

Kyrian walked in from a side room, a cup of tea in hand. “Oh, you’re back.” He glanced around. “Is Pierce here, too?”

“She’s found someone else to annoy,” Ilea answered.

“Good,” Kyrian said.

“Are you just hanging around? Or did you take the job offer?” Ilea said with a smile.

The man looked down. “A bit of combat training and curse resistance. Not much yet. I do want to relax while I’m here, before I head back to the Isles.”

“Yeah, about that…” Ilea said, scratching the back of her head.

“What?”

Verena sighed. “Ah, now it makes sense. Team thirty-four,” she murmured, looking at their shifting expressions. “Right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Ilea said, sitting down opposite the Headmaster.

“What brings you here, then?” Trian asked.

“Some new findings, some new potential issues. It’s good that you’re here too, Kyrian.”

“You were only gone for a day. What did you do this time?” he asked, a slight grin on his face as he summoned himself a chair.

“Ah, you know how it is.”

As she outlined her encounters with Audur and the Pursuer, the two listened with interest.

“I saw you posted guards,” Ilea said when she was done, pointing upward.

“Yes. The interest in our organization is mounting – not just potential new students, but opportunistic adventurers, thieves, and spies,” Trian explained. “Two mid-level Sentinels are usually enough to handle them. Not everyone has to know we have a working… Aki on our side.”

“You can trust her,” Ilea said, gesturing at Verena.

Trian gave her a look and nodded. “I assume that’s why you’re here?”

Verena gave them a curious look.

“Yep. Is he around? How’s he doing?”

“He’s good, though more and more of our higher-level teams can take him on now, which I know he finds frustrating.”

Ilea grinned.

“Yeah. We’ll see about that,” she said, standing up. “I assume it’s fine if he’s gone for a while?”

Trian smiled back at her. “Of course. Good luck to all of you.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll join you in a few days, if you’re still looking for more of those… artifacts,” Kyrian said.

“Sure, just send me a message,” Ilea said, leaving with Verena in tow.

“Aki, he’s a Taleen machine?” Verena asked once they were outside.

“Yes,” Ilea said. “Kind of? You’ll see.”

Ilea checked the training halls with her dominion until she heard the familiar impacts of steel on steel and saw the fast-moving spear wielder running after a few teleporting Sentinels, their missing limbs regenerating.

“No wonder they’re already so strong,” Verena said as they stood and watched. “This would be incredibly risky, even with healers nearby.”

“Being one yourself is the best way to know what to fix and how to do so,” Ilea said. “He’s not going for lethal blows.”

“The device in its neck, what’s that?”

Ilea smiled.

“It can control its body through that? The core, then… I see. You’re working hard to ally yourself with terrifying beings. What’s your end goal, Ilea Spears?”

“World domination, of course,” Ilea said in a dry tone.

“Hmm, sure.”

“Fresh meat, I see,” Aki said with glowing green eyes, twirling his spear as he looked at the two newcomers.

The Sentinel squad paused, using the time to heal up and spread out in a tactical manner.

“We will continue later,” Aki said, dismissing the group.

The Sentinels nodded to their teacher, greeted the two women, then filed out the door. When the large double doors closed behind the group, Aki deflated a little.

“I’m telling you, it’s getting harder and harder to keep up. I wish I could go on hunts as well, to level up myself.”

“Can you not?” Verena asked.

“I don’t think we’ve met. Who might you be?” Aki asked.

“Verena Quil, Elder of the Shadow’s Hand.”

“You can trust her,” Ilea said. “Maybe there’s a solution to your problem. It’s why we’re here.”

“You managed to disable a Praetorian?” Aki asked, his eyes glowing just a little brighter.

Ilea grinned. “Something like that. Do you mind coming north for a little while? Iana and Christopher are waiting.”

“As long as I don’t have to leave the entire defense of our headquarters to these young imbeciles for longer than a few days. Trian is busy enough as it is.”

“I can bring you back again quickly. I can teleport to more than one place now,” Ilea said.

Aki leaned in. “You can? Yes… Then this wouldn’t be much trouble, would it? When do you want to leave?”

“Now?”

“Now works.”

Ilea smiled and activated her third-tier Transfer, moving the three of them back into the Meadow’s domain.

Aki looked at the unfamiliar environment with obvious interest.

“You brought him!” Iana exclaimed, rushing over to them. “How have you been? Everything working fine?” Her eyes glowed a deep blue as she checked the enchantments on his body. “You’ve been using them a lot, it seems. Don’t overcharge them, they’ll break if you do it too much.”

“I’m sorry,” Aki said. “The Sentinels are growing quickly, and I have to keep up somehow.”

The enchantress grinned from ear to ear, leading the machine away and a little closer to the Meadow. “Not to worry, friend. We’ll help you figure out the next step in your evolution,” she said, then pointed at the silver sphere floating toward them.

“What is… a Pursuer Praetorian? I haven’t heard of them. What level is it?” he asked.

“You’ll see. Ready for some testing?”

“Of course,” Aki answered, eyes flashing a little brighter as he gazed at the sphere.

“Right, Meadow! You should have a look at him too.”

“How did you meet him?” Verena asked Ilea as the enchantress got to work, her magic flaring a few times before she carefully removed Aki from the now limp Centurion.

“I found him in a Taleen dungeon. Below Dawntree,” Ilea said.

“Any idea what he is?”

“Iana has tried to figure it out, but she’s not found anything conclusive yet. To me, he’s a person like everyone else. Species… dagger.”

“Aki is not a living being,” the Meadow informed her.

“What exactly constitutes a living being? He seems to have his own thoughts,” Ilea said.

“He produces no mana. The creation of this object or his… person is… intricate. I will need some time to decipher what it means. He may be more complex even than the Taleen teleportation gates.”

“So the Taleen definitely made him?”

Iana had mostly confirmed as much, but the evidence hadn’t been conclusive as far as Ilea had understood it.

“Yes. It’s highly unlikely that someone other than the makers of this Pursuer created the being you call Aki. But there is no… essence, no life. Not truly. I believe the enchantments… yes… it seems to be… a mind, of sorts.”

“That much is obvious.”

“You misunderstand. It’s as complex as a real mind, though perhaps my choice of words is misleading. He is as real as you and I. It is confusing, though. If the same makers created the Dagger of Akelion, their battle machines should be far more intricate and dangerous. They found a way to analyze the mind, to translate it. To go so far as to create an artificial mind seems… irresponsible,” the Meadow said, warming to its theme now.

“Conclusion?” Iana asked. “It fits, doesn’t it?”

Ilea assumed the enchanters could comprehend the Meadow’s speech after all their time together. Either that or they’d found some other way to communicate other than floating writing.

“Aki is a mind, similar to those of the beings present,” the Meadow explained. *“He will not be influenced. You were right to disable the enchantments that aimed to do so, Iana. And you’re right. His makeup is perfectly interlinked with the enchantments contained within this Pursuer core Ilea has brought us. Given what I have glimpsed of its design, only simple commands could rest within. There should be no issue simply connecting the two beings.”*

“No safeguards that we missed?” Iana asked. “We searched the Centurion, too, but it seems like Aki bypasses everything. The same seems true for the Pursuer. The underlying enchantments are the same.”

“Yes. There are many defenses, though none against this mind. It should disable everything, more efficiently than even we could ever hope to do.”

“Hear that, Aki? You’re perfect for this new machine,” Iana said with a smile. “Should we do it, then?”

“Better let the tree handle it, in case something goes wrong,” Ilea said. “The Pursuer is a dangerous machine.”

“A reasonable suggestion,” the Meadow said as both Aki and the core floated closer to the tree. *“Are you ready then, Aki?”*

“Yes, let’s see if it works. And… please pull me out if it doesn’t.”

“I will.”

“Then you may start.”

“I will first disable the shield,” the Meadow said.

The sphere soon began vibrating as magical pressure built around it. Ilea could see the fabric of space shifting around the two objects, the Meadow using space magic to break the core’s defenses.

They all watched on as the thin shield shattered and the dagger instantly slammed into the core.

“Won’t that damage whatever tech is inside?” Ilea asked.

“The Pursuer possesses an advanced self-repair function. It applies to the core as well,” the Meadow said as the sphere grew a tiny bit. *“It has already adjusted to the foreign object, and yet it doesn’t reject it. As expected.”*

“Come on!” Iana exclaimed.

A set of large barriers formed around the floating sphere, silver metal growing around it, soon reforming the same Pursuer that had fought Ilea. Aki was now somewhere inside, protected by the same shield that covered the core.

Green eyes flickered to life as the creature stumbled lightly, looking around as if confused. “It seems…” a mechanical voice said, “…to have worked,” it continued, the voice changing slightly as it made adjustments. “Thank you.”

“Is that you, Aki?” Ilea asked.

“Yes… oh, you’re tiny… Things move so slowly, and I can see… farther. Is that magic?” he said, crouching down a little in his larger form. “This will take some getting used to, but it’s not too different from the… what is this…?”

Void magic lit up within his cannons, and then it flickered out as his arms changed shape. Dull blade-like extensions that reminded Ilea more of a Dali painting formed and reformed before finally shifting back to the initial cannons.

“More to figure out,” the Pursuer said. “I have a shield now, too!”

He hit his own body with one of the cannons, and his magical defenses flashed.

Now that’s fucking wild.

Ilea felt both happy and confused. Abducting a Praetorian for Aki had felt absurd, but this? And it was all thanks to her teleportation and the fact that she could simply bring both the Pursuer and Aki here to the Meadow.

This is huge. This alone would be enough to defend the Sentinels from almost any human threats. This dagger that I found in a Taleen dungeon.

The enchanters rejoiced, welcoming Aki back as he stumbled toward them. Iana instantly started inspecting its shield and carapace.

“I’ll keep an eye on him for now. But it seems our understanding wasn’t flawed,” the Meadow said. *“More interesting and troublesome is the question of how and why he was created.”*

“I agree, though it’s good to have a damn Pursuer on our side. That’s fucking crazy,” Ilea said.

“Well, I don’t know if you realized, but both you and I are far more powerful than this machine. And we are on our side, too.”

She smiled. *“Yeah. I think I’m starting to realize that. On an entirely unrelated subject to all these thoughts on power, change, and responsibility, how far along are the gates?”*

“They are close to finished.”

Ilea took in a deep breath. *“And they’re going to work? This isn’t a fluke?”*

“They will work. I am entirely certain. The question will be when we connect the settlements and cities of Hallowfort, Ravenhall, and their allies and how efficiently we can produce them.”

“Alright. That’s enough of that for now. I think I need a break.”

Ilea summoned the locator. “I think I’ll continue exploring. Anybody want to join?” she asked, looking at Verena.

“You don’t want to fly alone?”

“Not super concerned about being efficient right now,” Ilea said. “Aki, you look good in silver.”

“Thank you,” the machine said as he glanced at her. “We will talk again when I feel more adjusted.”

Ilea smiled. “Yes.”

“I’ll join you as well,” Feyrair said, reappearing among them.

“You sure? We might not find high-level beasts.”

“I would’ve gone back to the Krahen Isles, but someone wasn’t very considerate in her teleportation choices,” he said, then hissed with a smile.

Pierce reappeared then as well, a bright smile on her face as a large pack appeared on her back. “So we’re leaving again?”

“Is that supposed to be an explorer look?” Ilea asked.

Pierce’s eyes opened wide. “Oh, right!” A brown hat appeared on her head with a blue feather sticking out of it.

“Much better,” Ilea deadpanned.

“I know, right? I love putting these together. I’d make a Lilith one too, but you’re so dreadfully boring. Maybe you should get a personal tailor or something? I’m sure it would help your reputation. You lack the natural grace of an elf.”

“I wonder about that. The males aren’t *that* interesting, though I haven’t met an Oracle yet.”

“How do they look, Fey dear?”

He hissed, raising a burning hand toward her. “Don’t call me that.”

“Ah, you’re so easily irritated, dear,” she said, vanishing when a bright beam of white light shot out at her, hitting a glowing barrier instead.

Ilea smiled and shook her head. *What the fuck even is all this?*

She turned around to see Hereven painting something into a leather-bound book.

He twitched slightly when he noticed her gaze. *“Apologies, mistress. I am merely observing and taking notes. The interactions between the various species here are quite fascinating.”*

“Sure,” Ilea replied, looking back at the two idiots chasing each other again.

“Come on, Verena, they’ll join us or they won’t. Teleport us to somewhere out there, Meadow?”

“Try not to piss off another dragon,” the being said as Ilea disabled her Space Magic Resistance.

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THIRTY-THREE

Tombs

Ilea and Verena appeared in the crevice leading to the Penumra dungeon. Feyrair and Pierce joined them a few seconds later, no longer fighting. Both were clad in armor and seemed calm and collected.

Professional idiots, Ilea thought to herself as she looked at the locator. Nothing nearby, but they had a direction to go on.

Two Elders and a Cerithil Hunter, Ilea thought, looking at the group waiting expectantly.

"Where to, bosswoman?" Pierce asked.

"Follow the arrow. How's your Lightning Resistance?" Ilea asked, glancing at Verena. "I know Fey and Pierce can manage."

"I should be able to manage. Let me get used to it," the woman said, flames spreading over her form as she ascended toward the clifftop, dark clouds moving above.

"Will she be fine?" Ilea asked.

Pierce chuckled. "Ah, the young and unfaithful. If you didn't exist, I'd say she's the toughest human I know."

Ilea blinked to the clifftop too, spreading her wings as a bolt of arcane lightning struck her. The energy slowly spread through her body without leaving any lasting damage, the light burns healed in moments. She watched as Verena hovered upward, energy gathering in the clouds before she was hit directly.

Her chest burst open as half her torso burnt up, gurgling noises filling the air as a tinge of red mixed in with her fiery flames. Muscles flexed as the burnt and torn tissue regained its color, knitting itself back together with what looked like sheer will.

“It’s quite a gruesome sight. I think that’s why she doesn’t show it to too many people,” Pierce said as she flew up beside Ilea.

Ilea glanced between Pierce and the regenerating Elder before another strike hit her burning and flying form, this time leaving considerably less damage in its wake.

“Effective,” Feyrair commented as he joined them, burning wings on his back.

Verena flew over a few seconds later, dull red runes now visible on her body, most of her features somewhat obscured by burning flames.

“I’m good to go,” she said, her voice now slightly deeper with a distinct whispering backdrop.

“Now that’s pretty hot,” Ilea said before she refocused on the locator.

Pierce blinked at her. “Oh.”

“I’ll take these two, then, or do you want to carry us all?” Ilea asked, looking at Pierce.

“What an honor! Alas, my ability will not allow for such feats. My flight is rather… delicate. Balancing four people, especially people of such *political* weight, would pose an issue.”

Ilea smiled. “Then I’ll carry these two,” she said, her ashen limbs extending as she charged her wings. She wanted to fly somewhat low, hoping to avoid whatever creatures dwelled far above the storms and clouds. A moment later, they shot away. Pierce was a streak of lightning, forging on ahead, while the others flew over the barren northern landscape with incredible momentum.

Ilea kept an eye on the locator, continually adjusting their trajectory, occasionally soaring higher to avoid extensive stone outcrops or outright mountains. They didn’t see any local creatures braving the northern storms, either unable or not interested in the small and fast-moving prey.

Despite their speed, the group was occasionally struck by arcane lightning. Ilea simply flew through the clouds as she was both unwilling and unable to dodge with her charged wings. Her resilience had supposedly increased greatly anyway, and if the worst happened, she had Displacement and Phaseshift to work with.

About half an hour later, Ilea started to see distant magical impacts within some of the crevices, unlike what most of the wild creatures in the area tended to use in their hunts. She slowed down to observe, barely able to make out the distant spells.

“What do you see?” Verena asked, her body still aflame and covered in runic tattoos. Whatever her spell was, it didn’t seem to be short-lived.

“Sapient beings, I think, fighting or hunting something.” Ilea paused. “Fighting. Both sides, if there are only two, are using targeted spells.”

“Want to butt in?” Pierce asked.

Ilea checked the locator, which was pointing northeast. “No, just thought it was curious.”

As they continued their flight, it occurred to Ilea that they had stumbled upon a battle between the forces of the Dark Protector and the Feynor. Either way, they had their own reason for being here and continued to follow the guidance of their derivative Taleen technology.

Night soon came over the northern landscape, mists forming on the ground and flowing down into the many fissures and crevices. As Ilea slowed to watch the serene dance of the Miststalkers resume, she saw that the locator was now pointing behind them, toward one mountain between dozens more. Nothing about it seemed out of the ordinary.

“Down there,” she said, crossing the rest of the distance as she kept an eye out for any monster or Feynor ambushes. This was farther north than Ilea had ever been, excluding perhaps her short visit to the home of the Fae, but that mountain peak could just as well have been a separate realm for all she knew.

The others fanned out a little, surveying the environment with their own abilities as they made landfall near the mountain. No pools of mist reached their location, the distant Miststalkers entirely uncaring for the group of adventurers.

“No entrance on this side, not on the surface,” Verena said, scanning the shadowy mountainside. She whipped her head upward.

Ilea followed her gaze and saw a small group of Famine Crows flying toward them, attracted by the bright light of both Feyrair’s wings and Verena’s form. The large birds had a body about one meter long, with a wingspan four times that. Leathery skin covered their gray forms.

“Let’s try not to attract too much attention to this place,” Ilea said and set off at a run, heading straight at the swarm, her ashen limbs spreading as

they started teleporting toward their prey.

Space Awareness, coupled with her precognition, allowed Ilea to see where they went with each use of their teleportation magic. She sliced eight of them apart upon impacting the group. She teleported through the largest cluster, her ash alone enough to rip through their wings and bodies.

Their screeches were loud and harsh as the bulk of their number scattered, rushing away from the blender-like human. She continued to teleport through their retreating ranks, occasionally preventing some of them from using their skill as she observed her own ability with Space Awareness.

Ilea eventually stopped her slaughter, simply using the quick-moving and teleporting birds as a source for some Space Shift training, the only one of her third Class' skills not yet at the end of the third tier.

"Not worth killing the rest," Ilea announced.

Around level four hundred. It would've been dangerous to engage them when I first came to the north. Now, not so much.

"It's strange that most monsters don't seem to understand what they should and shouldn't attack," she added.

"Humans of our power are rare, how would anyone know?" Verena replied.

The group headed back toward the mountain, and the Elder soon pointed out a small crevice leading into it. Ilea went in first, holding the locator ahead of her as she plunged into the darkness, effortlessly navigating the ancient cracks and tunnels, likely natural or made to appear so.

"No traps," she murmured, letting herself fall into a broad tunnel, her embers the only source of light in the vicinity.

The others joined a minute later as they all found their own way down, though some with more issues than others.

Pierce was the first, having teleported through most everything. "Ominous," she said, a few sparks of lightning traveling over her armor. "Third-tier Light Magic Resistance?"

"Yeah, among other abilities. You?"

"Similar. My lightning travels over surfaces. And I can see nearby mana sources. You, for example," she explained, glancing up. "Already here?"

Feyrair jumped down, hissing at the woman as he looked around, his eyes outright glowing in the dark, wisps of white flame clinging to his

armored form. “I believe the last time you rushed into the unknown, you managed to anger a dragon of all things.”

Pierce waved him off. “Oh, that’s so far in the past, it’s hardly worth mentioning.”

Finally, Verena hovered down, her eyes on fire. The tattoos from before were gone, as was the fire covering her whole body.

“This way,” Ilea said, leading them through the darkness. She glanced behind her and smiled.

Not quite an adventuring team anymore, though I’m not sure what we would be.

“Looks made by something intelligent,” Verena mused.

“There are a lot of sapient creatures hiding within the northern lands,” Pierce said. “Let’s hope they’re weaker than us.”

“We negotiate if they have a key,” Ilea said.

“Ah, yes, sure. What if they decided four hundred years ago that the key is the very embodiment of their god?”

Ilea tilted her head back a little, glancing at the woman. “We’ll figure it out when we get there. Maybe we can borrow their god for a little while.”

“How considerate.”

“No signs of anything living?” Ilea asked.

“All quiet. Empty.”

“Weird,” Ilea said. “There’s an entrance coming up,” she added as they rounded a corner, coming toward a few old sets of stairs leading up to a rather large stone double door.

“Feynor,” Pierce said immediately.

“How… ah, yes,” Ilea said, looking at the carvings in the stone.

Front and center was a prominent four-legged winged being flying upward, while smaller, horned, distinctly Feynor creatures knelt in prayer near the bottom of the carving.

She couldn’t see any living creatures within, and no light was coming through the doors either. Nor were there any enchantments or traps preventing entry.

“Please not another dragon,” she said and opened the gates.

The air inside was stuffy, with a faint hint of death. Ilea was ready to be assaulted by whatever necrotic abomination had claimed this place as their own, but nothing came rushing at the intruders.

Beyond the entrance lay a small stone platform with a dark abyss beyond, a suspension bridge made of metal and wood leading into the darkness about fifty meters away. Ilea could already see pyramid-like stone buildings hanging from the cavern ceiling like carved stalactites. Only a few windows adorned the structures, their barren forms desolate and imposing in the lightless cavern.

“Feynor alright,” Pierce whispered.

“Death is in the air,” Verena added.

“I can’t feel anything. Undead have mana too.”

Ilea looked into the depths and breathed in deeply.

“This place creeps me out, let’s get the key and fuck off. No unnecessary teleports,” Ilea said before she flew to the other side of the abyss, carefully inspecting the air through her dominion, just in case there were any auras or enchantments.

The others followed behind, the group silently landing on the other side and approaching an entrance leading into the connected structures.

“Why do they build like this?” Ilea asked, stepping through the entrance and inspecting the walls. There were a few defensive runes in place, but none were active. Dust covered the floor, but she couldn’t find the source of the smell.

“Creatures in caves rarely fly,” Verena said. “And while quite a few can climb up walls, they often have at least some difficulties clinging to ceilings.”

I guess Hallowfort was built high up, too, she thought, impressed with the architecture.

The interior seemed simple but comfortable – granted that would have been with hearths burning and other light sources, coupled with the smell of food and sounds of people. As it was, it reminded her more of a tomb than anything else.

But they had yet to find the dead.

Ilea led the group deeper into the structures, the combined size of the buildings enough to house a small city. They had built vertically more than horizontally to make the most of the space they had down in this natural cavern.

Ilea wondered if they’d carved the pyramids into the ceiling or if they had somehow added the stone with magic. She also found it a little weird

that a group of beings worshiping dragons had built their settlement so far below the earth.

Might just be my expectations. Audur seemed to live underground, after all.

The locator led them into a temple of sorts, various shrines depicting winged creatures of various sizes and different qualities. Ilea checked to see if she could recognize Audur in any of the pieces, but failed to find her.

The locator pointed at a large wooden chest sitting in front of a dragon coated in silver. Ilea went over and opened it, finding a few silver coins of various denominations, a few chunks of unrefined silver ore, and a pyramid-like Taleen key.

“It’s here.” She blinked her eyes, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but nothing else happened. “I suggest we take it and then teleport out immediately.”

“We could loot the place, there’s plenty of treasure still here,” Pierce said.

Ilea paused. It was tempting, but after her experience in the Izculen dungeon, she felt a little uneasy.

“They just left all this here?” Feyrair asked. “Their dragon gods are what they care about. I don’t think they would just leave these relics behind for no reason.”

“Maybe some kind of mind magic creature walked in and ate them all?” Pierce asked. “Maybe they formed a new belief system and decided to move out? We can waste time guessing, or we can get looting.”

Despite her words, Pierce hadn’t touched anything yet.

[The Stonehammer Key – Ancient Quality]

Ilea grabbed the key, stored it, and waited to see if something happened. No enchantments came to life. No monster came to get them.

“Alright, let’s see what we can get. But we stay together at all times, and communicate if you perceive even a sliver of something suspicious.”

Feyrair hissed joyously as he looked at the dragon statues. He stopped near one of them and grinned broadly, raising his hand before a beam of white flame burned through the length of the dragon, its head falling to the stone floor with a thud.

“What’s that about?” Pierce asked.

“Garonoth,” the elf hissed. “Next time we meet, I will win.”

Ilea gave him a smile. She left most of the clutter behind, focusing on gold alone, and found about a hundred and fifty pieces in total, found on various plates, in chests, and on the floor between ornaments and ceremonial armor.

“Very stylish,” Pierce said, grabbing a dragon-like helmet and putting it on. “Might get a few looks at the next ball I won’t go to.”

“They’d ask about which esteemed smith made it,” Ilea said.

“You, yes. They’d ask me what creature I slaughtered to get the skull.”

“How did you get such a wonderful reputation?”

“They don’t mean it in an admiring way,” she said, making the helmet vanish. “These are made for rituals alone. Barely worth looking at.”

“Besides their make, their worth in gold, and their historical value,” Verena said.

“Feynor history? That’s funny,” Pierce said.

“Maybe there’s a treasury somewhere?” Verena suggested.

Ilea shook her head. “Not in the vicinity. I guess this is it, if they have one. This place is very central, too.”

“I suppose,” the Elder said. “It’s a shame they don’t like painting.”

Painting? Looking for art, then?

“Some of the doors have nice carvings,” Ilea said, pointing at one of the exits.

Verena considered her words before she walked over and ripped the thing off its hinges. She held the thick wooden door with both hands and smiled.

“A souvenir, at least.”

As Ilea watched Verena hack away the sides until she could store it, she sent out a few ashen birds, a little inspired by her recent dragon encounter. She infused them with the simple command to return to her if they found anything worth checking out.

When the ashen birds had circled around the set of structures, Ilea motioned to the others. “We’re done here,” she said, spreading her wings and flying toward the exit. The others followed without complaint.

As she flew over the suspension bridge, Ilea looked down into the abyss. Nothing appeared to interrupt or attack her, which only deepened her unease. She held her breath until they reached the exit again, leaving the mountain tunnels for the northern surface.

Ilea didn’t feel like dallying in the area. She checked her surroundings for anything suspicious but found nothing. The locator pointed northwest, so she collected her allies and flew off toward the next target.

Another key. And no more dragons. Things are looking up.

Though I do hope we find some interesting things to fight.

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THIRTY-FOUR

Stormy Weather

The journey took them even farther north, the winds picking up as they advanced. Ice started to form on the group, despite their heat generation and fire magic. It hadn't reached Ice Elemental levels, but Ilea wondered how anything below level five to six hundred could feasibly survive in an environment like this.

They took a break in a small cavern above a mountain outcrop, Feyrair producing a flame that provided warmth. None of them was in any danger of actually freezing, but the comfort was appreciated.

Ilea shook the ice off her wings and shoulders, her own heat generation not currently active. "Shit weather up here," she murmured.

"Lightning will still strike here. We're not past that latitude yet," Pierce informed them. "Gets more dangerous up there, if you can believe it."

"Of course, that's where all the creatures who can claim a place in the suns live," Feyrair said with a smile.

"Have you been there?" Ilea asked, sitting down and summoning some food.

"A few times, yes," he said, hissing. "Dangerous for someone below level three hundred. More so for those above."

Verena nodded to herself. "Worthy prey."

"Yes. Elves aren't the only ones interested in hunting," Fey said with a grin. "But of course, that dragon vastly underestimated me. I was about to win that battle when he decided to retreat."

Pierce started laughing, dodging a fire beam that burned into the cavern wall.

“Stop it, please. You two are so loud,” Verena said. “You’ll attract attention.” She looked at Ilea. “You want to go alone? None of us is particularly geared for stealth.”

Feyrair waved them off. “Ilea’s space magic easily offsets her lack of stealth. She escaped a dragon, after all. Not quite the same feat as challenging one, but it’s sufficiently impressive to travel north from here.”

“She did challenge it,” Verena said.

“How did you fare?” Feyrair asked with glowing eyes.

“About as well as against the Meadow. And I know neither was exactly going all out,” Ilea answered.

“I can still hear her frustrated roar before you moved us out of there,” Pierce said. “I owe you one for that experience. Whatever you want.”

She winked.

Is she… flirting? Now?

Pierce glanced over at Feyrair, then back at her.

Oh? Really? Really. I meeean…

Ilea looked at the woman before she glanced at Feyrair.

Hmm.

They did seem to have fun back below Hallowfort. And we’re here, after all. This is quite a cozy little cave. And who knows what else we’ll find.

“As long as we’re all clear that this is strictly casual,” Ilea said.

The elf looked at her, raising one eyebrow. “Oh. I see.”

Pierce blushed lightly, a broad smile on her face as she covered her mouth with both hands. “The elf… and… Lilith?”

Verena sighed. “I’ll be waiting outside. Don’t take too long.”

“Interrupt us if something shows up,” Ilea said.

“No, I won’t,” Verena said in a matter-of-fact tone before vanishing from the cave.

Feyrair grinned, looking at Ilea as he rested his chin on one hand. “There wasn’t even a fight to get me excited,” he complained.

“We can fight – a little bit,” Ilea smiled, appearing in front of him as her heat started charging. She caught his strike and broke his arm, then threw him to the side and sighed.

Feyrair landed and skidded to a halt, a grin on his face as he healed his injury.

“Is it… always like this?” Pierce purred as her metal armor flowed away.

“Oh, you know how elves are,” Ilea said, appearing behind the woman, her hands coming to rest on Pierce’s hips as sparks of lightning flowed across her. “Now, do you want to try me, too?”

* * *

Ilea sighed, rolling around in her bed of ash with two defeated monsters by her side.

Maybe not something I’d do regularly, but that was fun.

She stood up, layering her mantle over her body before she stepped out into the blizzard. Looking over her shoulder, she saw some of the ground inside was still glowing. The cave certainly looked a little rougher than it had before.

Ilea found Verena sitting on a boulder about ten meters away, half covered in ice and snow as she meditated. She glanced down at her and smiled, joining her as she formed heat within herself, creating a small shield of ash against the blizzard.

Verena opened her eyes and looked at Ilea before accepting the bottle of ale that she handed to her.

“It’s not every day you can share a drink in a northern blizzard.”

“I suppose not,” Verena said, removing the cork from the bottle.

“Sorry for taking so long.”

They clinked their bottles together.

“I hope you didn’t expect me to join.”

“I wouldn’t have said no,” Ilea said. “Though you don’t strike me as quite so casual.”

“Pierce was always annoyed,” she smiled. “But I should stop using her as a baseline.”

“You really should.”

I never did go back to the Root...

“It’s nice,” Verena said after a short pause. “To feel nature, as much as here.”

“I suppose it’s not easy to find climates this extreme,” Ilea said. Her bottle was nearly glowing with the heat her body gave off, while Verena’s was literally on fire. Just for the liquid to stay, well, liquid. “When we’re

back in Hallowfort, you'll have to try a lava bath courtesy of the Trakorov. It's the laziest four-mark monster you'll find. Great for resistance training, too."

"Hmm, that sounds lovely. After this. A monster, though – won't it just eat me?"

"Not if I'm there," Ilea answered.

What am I even suggesting? She smiled to herself and sighed. *Having an actual threesome with Feyrair and Pierce. I mean, I fought a dragon earlier. I guess it's just a bit of an intense week.*

"Is there someone you're close to?"

Verena gave her a glance. "There have been a few, yes. But my lifestyle makes it difficult to keep anything serious from falling apart."

"Yeah."

"What about you?"

Ilea wondered about that. There were quite a few people she was close to. But she'd gone on adventures and left them for months – years, even – without them knowing if she was even still alive.

It hadn't even occurred to her to seriously date someone. Not that she felt a massive need for it. She had her friends, and she felt close to them, no matter how much time passed between the occasions on which she saw them.

Though with my new teleportation, it feels a little different now. I've seen the Meadow several times a week since I got the upgrade. Same for Trian, Claire, and Kyrian. And with the marks, I can keep in touch even when I'm not there.

"Not right now," Ilea said, though for the first time since she'd arrived in Elos, she actually considered it. "I can teleport around now, though. So who knows? Maybe someday."

"I do envy your space magic. Though at the same time, there's something exciting about just going out on an adventure without an easy way back."

"Yeah. I get that. I really do. But space magic is still better."

Verena chuckled. She finished her drink and threw the empty bottle out into the storm.

"Throwing trash into nature?"

The Elder smiled. "What other way do we humans have to leave our mark in these hostile lands?"

Ilea considered the words. They resonated. Back on Earth, humans had been the apex predator, the beings controlling everything. Here, however, they were lucky to have a territory of their own. She looked at her own empty bottle, closed one eye to aim, then threw it into the storm.

Pierce joined them, wearing her metal armor again, hugging Ilea and giving her a kiss on her cheek. “That was fun.”

“You know what? It was.”

Pierce laughed, stretching, as Feyrair stepped out from the cave and transformed into his dragon form. He spread his wings and roared into the storm, though most of the sound was lost rather quickly within the blizzard.

“Elves,” Pierce tutted. “So, we continue?”

Ilea summoned the locator and turned around. “Yeah. Ready everyone? Last chance for a pee.”

* * *

As they continued their flight through the freezing blizzard, the strong winds and ice slowed them down considerably. Even Pierce was now being carried by Ilea. Her own flight magic wasn’t made to handle this kind of weather.

Ilea could only trust her dominion and the locator; even with all her advancements, visibility in the storm was only around three meters. She had to adjust their altitude a few times as the environment seemed to be sloping upward, forcing her to move ever higher to avoid a collision. So far, she hadn’t noticed any difference in the air quality, but she had a few skills to help with that. The mana density had certainly increased, though not as quickly as down in the Descent or near high-level creatures.

Finally, they broke free of the storm, coming to a stop on a frozen ledge above the chaotic clouds. Ilea could see flashes of red inside the freezing storm a few dozen kilometers west, and a set of ice crystals blazed toward the sky, moonlight reflecting off the shards before they shattered in a spectacular series of explosions.

“We just barely missed whatever’s fighting in there,” Ilea said.

“That storm isn’t natural?” Pierce asked.

“It should be,” Verena answered.

Ilea sat down on the ledge, summoning a meal as she watched the storm. “The scale alone would suggest an Ice Elemental, or something even

stronger.”

“Well, at least we’ve probably made it past the lightning storms,” Pierce said and looked around. “And it just goes further up.”

Ilea looked around at the mountains reaching up toward the sky. She breathed out, the air crisp and ice cold. She felt small. Seemingly endless mountain ranges loomed above and beyond them. And the sky looked different here, darker. It felt like looking at an ocean.

She savored the sight, almost considering setting a teleportation point here. To explore, to find out what kind of beings lived up here, if there even were any at all.

“That’s why I love this fucking place,” Pierce said, suddenly in a summer dress that froze near instantly. “Shit,” she murmured, storing it again. “I hope that’s salvageable. Ah, well.”

“Just use your magic,” Ilea said, moving her mantle into a copy of the dress she had worn at the Yinnahall ball.

“Hah! Yeah, let me just make a dress out of metal,” Pierce complained.

“And here I thought you said ash was inferior.”

“You’re above level five hundred, woman. Of course your shit is better.”

“Levels have nothing to do with it. It’s just superior.”

Pierce grinned and sent a bolt of lightning at her.

Ilea just let it hit her face, smiling as the sparks flowed into her. “It adds to the dress, thanks.”

Pierce growled and walked away, grumbling something about ash abominations.

Ilea checked the locator. “We finally have a reading. Something nearby.”

“Here?” Verena asked, looking around. “Inside the mountain?”

“Doesn’t seem to be pointing down that much. Maybe one of the Key Wardens liked the view and got eaten by a dragon,” she said and scanned the skies. There were no dragons. No visible ones, at least.

She finished her meal and stood up, walking along the ledge of the sheer cliff as she tried to pinpoint the key’s location. “Might still be a ways off,” she said eventually and spread her wings.

The others joined her, and the group flew along the side of the mountain and toward the indicated location. About ten minutes later, Ilea slowed down as they were getting closer. As they flew over a rather spacious ledge

covered in snow, ice, and rocks, the angle of the arrow changed to point downward.

“There’s nothing here,” Pierce stated as they landed.

Ilea took a step forward and stopped, focusing on the wisps in the air. “There’s a barrier,” she said. “Right in front of me.”

“I can’t see anything,” Pierce said.

“Nor me,” Verena added.

“It’s mostly space magic. Pretty well made, too,” she said.

“Someone has kept this key hidden,” Verena said. “How extensive is the barrier?”

Ilea flew along the length of the ledge, out over the cliffside, then back toward the stone, flying higher still.

“Large,” she said when she landed again. “Probably something that needs to be maintained, but I don’t know much about enchantments. It doesn’t feel like an active spell someone is using. There’s almost no change.”

It’s good. But nowhere near something the Meadow could create. And it lacks the overwhelming power that I sensed from beings like Icy or Audur.

“Which means you can get us in,” Pierce said with a grin.

“Getting in shouldn’t be a problem, no.”

Ah. If there’s a space mage here, it might be dangerous. But I can’t help being curious.

Maybe I should avoid this one. I only just escaped a dragon before. She smiled to herself. *But that means I can escape another one. Right? And if I don’t face challenges, how will I grow?*

Who am I kidding? I just want to find out what’s in there.

“I’ll check it out. But alone,” Ilea said.

Pierce groaned. “Oh that’s annoying. I never thought I’d be too weak to be taken along on an adventure.”

“We almost died earlier. Ilea goes in and checks. You can send for us with your mark, right?” Verena asked, gesturing toward the back of her hand.

Ilea checked the barrier. “I don’t see why not… but if whoever made this is in there, they might have a way to stop my messages.”

“Fifteen minutes,” Pierce said. “Then we come after you.”

“Give me an hour. And instead of coming in, you should flee, but I won’t make that choice for you. I’ll message you or come and let you know

what I’ve found before then.”

“That is acceptable,” Fey said, staring down the invisible barrier with his reptilian eyes. “Be careful.”

“You know how difficult that is for me,” Ilea said, vanishing into the barrier with her next breath.

She checked the field of complex enchantments and didn’t see any reaction to her passing.

I’m getting really good at this.

The ledge itself looked more or less the same, and the snow was still passing through the barrier. What Ilea did see, however, was a rune-covered gate leading into the side of the mountain, about three meters high and two wide, made of solid steel.

Her dominion cut off at the entrance, unable to penetrate the enchantments. She tried to decipher them, but there were quite a few, including anti-space magic ones. It took her about a minute to figure out the defenses and displace herself inside.

She appeared within a rather spacious entrance hall, the ground, walls, and ceiling all made of steel, just like the door behind her. The hall, however, wasn’t barren. Instead, various richly decorated carpets on the ground, armchairs, sofas, and shelves were strewn about, seemingly of human make.

Human or humanoid, she thought, her wings moving slowly as she kept herself afloat, just in case there were enchantments on the ground. She checked and noted that there were. *Someone’s extra paranoid…*

The steel reminded her of the Ascended facility in the Descent, though everything else seemed different. The lighting was warm, intricate magical lamps adding to the homely atmosphere, while various doors made of beautifully carved wood led further into the complex. She could smell the same tea that was common in various human cities – it smelled suspiciously like coffee.

Ilea didn’t remember if her dominion had ever been quite as restricted; every single room was protected by more enchantments. She waited for a minute, simply observing the hall and the various barriers nearby.

She smiled when the entire set changed, a new mesh now protecting the facility. This set was easier than the previous one, at least to her. She had spent entire weeks just figuring out whatever the Meadow could throw at

her. If anybody could get into this place without using brute force, it was her.

Which felt a little ironic.

Maybe I'm turning into some kind of thief or rogue. First Halstein and the Corinth Order, then escaping from Audur, and now this? I guess I have to when punching isn't the solution or simply isn't enough.

Ilea floated over to one of the shelves and browsed the tomes resting within.

Advanced Barrier Appliance II: The Secrets of Vegetation Magic

Advanced Healing: Order of Balance

Ilea read a few more titles and found various sources that seemed familiar, at least based on the locations or organizations they named.

If there is an Ascended here, they're interested in human books. The last one didn't give me the impression that they cared.

She chose a random door and displaced herself through it, appearing in a long steel hallway. Paintings on the walls depicted various beings: humans, elves, dwarves, all in different situations. There was a general focus on magic, it seemed.

Ilea moved on, heading down a few sets of stairs before she appeared in a dimly lit hall, dozens of glass containers showing vaguely humanoid creatures frozen within. She couldn't detect any life inside them, but there was magic flowing into the containers from within the walls.

Of course it's a fucked up research facility.

She wondered whose it was this time. She left the bodies for now. The containers themselves felt cold as she flew past.

Displacing herself out of the hall brought her into another hallway with more paintings. She did a double-take and stopped near one of them, seeing the familiar outline of a humanoid made up of interlinked steel plates. Its well-depicted magical glint and glowing white eyes brought a smile to her face.

Could I face that Ascended now? I wonder. Let's hope I won't have to find out. Though I wouldn't be too disappointed if it came to that either. It's less intimidating than another dragon, at least.

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THIRTY-FIVE

Gods

Ilea pushed farther into the expansive complex as she looked through the confusing mesh of interior design choices. She was about to send a message to Verena when she appeared inside a large study. Like many of the other rooms, it was well furnished, carpets covering the steel floor and a hearth crackling away behind a huge wooden desk.

Behind the table was a large humanoid, currently hunched over a set of books and papers. Flames danced over the being's steel surface, an intricately designed and decorated white robe covering most of its torso and legs, and its two eyes shone with dim white light.

An Ascended.

Ilea could've left, could've teleported away, but she had come for a key. More to the point, she was interested in this being, just as she'd been interested in the Meadow, the Fae, the Enavurin.

Why was it here? What was the purpose of this facility?

The being didn't react to her, murmuring something to itself as it turned a few pages, making a note of something in a massive tome.

[Nature Mage – lvl ???]

Almost at one thousand. But not quite.

Ilea could tell it wasn’t the same Ascended she had met before. The interlinked metal plates looked similar but not the same; the design flowed differently, as if it were a different model made by the same smith. Its head also lacked the same adornment the other Ascended had worn, instead wearing some sort of half-ring set atop its steel scalp. It seemed a little more slender, but Ilea wasn’t sure if she remembered the other one well enough to be certain.

“And who might you be, curious human?” it asked, producing sound instead of using telepathy. Its steel face moved slightly, suggesting a jaw and cheekbones, and its voice sounded distinctly female.

Ilea watched it, making sure to keep an eye on the mesh of enchantments around them. She was still thinking of a reply when the Ascended spoke again.

“I would prefer it if there were no battle. There is research here dating back millennia; its destruction would be a loss to all living beings. Whatever reason has brought you here, I am sure we can find some sort of agreement.”

An Ascended willing to talk!

“That sounds good to me,” Ilea answered.

It definitely wasn’t the same Ascended. If a fight could be avoided, she would certainly accept. And if it proved inevitable, she would only benefit from more information. Still, her wings kept moving slowly, ready for a quick departure.

“I’m sorry for intruding, kind of. I guess I was curious due to the remote location. I didn’t expect an Ascended here in the north,” she said.

The Ascended looked at her for a moment. “You didn’t know I’d be here? And yet you know of our kind?”

“I didn’t. But now that I’ve found you, I’m certainly curious. I’ve met one of your kind before, yes. That’s why I’m not sure I can trust you. I don’t plan to destroy your research, but if you attack me, I’ll fight back with everything I have.”

“I am well aware of your capabilities, human. There is no need for threats. We have established our position. Know that whoever you met, they’re not me, nor do I likely associate with them.” It paused. “I must warn you, there is one more within this facility, a human like you.” Its eyes glowed a little brighter before it spoke. “Have you met them already?”

“You’re the first living creature I’ve found,” Ilea said honestly.

She decided to risk it and sent a message to Verena. *“Stand down for now. Do not attack until I call.”*

The Ascended made a whistling sound. “Amusing. One able to traverse the mesh, passing without notice. You are a space mage, then, and a capable one at that.”

As it spoke, another person materialized next to the Ascended, the mesh around them vibrating with power.

He was human, just like the Ascended had told her, wearing a long-sleeved, buttoned black shirt and pants. His black hair was rather long and unkempt, with visible streaks of gray, while his near-golden eyes looked almost reptilian. He glared at Ilea, power vibrating around him. He seemed about to cast several spells, but he held them – for now.

[Barrier Mage – lvl ???]

She pointed at him. “What?”

Ilea would’ve been tense, but she knew this man. It was Albert, the guy she had met on one of her missions with the Shadow’s Hand. She had even fought him before he’d left and found Cless. He was the one who had taught Cless magic in the first place.

“What?” he asked. “Do I know you?”

“Oh my god, that’s so insulting,” Ilea said.

He’s just above level six hundred. Which means he must’ve tried really hard not to kill me last time we met. But why is he here? Do they have one of the keys?

“I didn’t come for him either,” she said to the Ascended.

“Who are you? And how did you get in here?” the man asked.

Ilea sighed. “I left that little of an impression? Well, it makes sense. Albert, right? You remember Cless? She’s doing well, by the way.”

Recognition sparked in his eyes, and some of the tension was replaced by obvious confusion, then disbelief. “The ash mage? With the Shadows? How? Why? You made me relocate!”

“Made you relocate? That entire place was trapped, and I’m pretty sure people died trying to go down into that dungeon,” Ilea retorted.

He touched his chin, clean-shaven now, then sighed. “I vaguely recall telling you that it wasn’t me who built that place. What happened to Cless?”

“She’s doing well. Busy with lessons and painting. Who knows, she might just be sketching the both of us right now.”

“Is there something I should know?” the Ascended asked.

Albert raised his arms in defense. “Nothing of the sort, dear.”

Dear? Oh.

“She’s just a Shadow…” He narrowed his eyes. “A Shadow who’s advanced… more than rapidly. That is ludicrous. Where and how could you have even found so many creatures to hunt and kill? And how did you not die being so reckless?”

Ilea nodded along. “Different places. The demon realm, Erendar – that’s some kind of moon in a different realm. There were tons of spirits there. That was a big push. And lastly, an island far to the west. I’ve also destroyed plenty of Taleen machinery. I really like fighting.”

“That is evident,” he deadpanned.

“And I’m a healer.”

The Ascended laughed, and Albert sighed.

“A healer. Well, it’s good to hear that Cless has found a place in this world. She was stranded here, you know? From another realm.” He gave her a long look and then continued. “But even if she advanced at a pace as ludicrous as yours, her divination wouldn’t be able to penetrate the barriers in place. You, on the other hand, slipped through. Which means you did more than advance your ash and healing.”

“A little. I expected another tomb or dungeon here…” Ilea said. “There are so many things I want to ask you – and you, for that matter,” she added, glancing at the Ascended.

“I have plenty of questions, too. First, why did you intrude in our home?” Albert asked.

“I didn’t know it was your home. I apologize.”

“Come, let us move into the lounge,” the Ascended said. “We hardly ever use it these days. I’m sure we can have this talk over some tea and baked goods.”

Albert sighed. He seemed to deflate, then shook his head. “Sure. I guess we’re hosting thieves now.”

“Not a thief yet,” Ilea said.

“Shush, you two. Go on, and disable the barriers while you’re at it,” the Ascended said.

Albert gestured for Ilea to go through the door.

No fighting, then? She did offer baked goods. Can't argue with that.

Both of them followed the being of steel to the cozy area Ilea had seen when she'd first entered the complex.

What the hell is this guy doing here with an Ascended?

"Here we are," the Ascended said, summoning a few plates holding various cookies. They were still warm, and a chocolaty smell spread through the vicinity. Albert's stomach growled.

"When did you last eat?" it asked, pouring some tea for the two humans.

Albert sat down in one of the armchairs, displacing one of the cookies into his hand.

Ilea blinked her eyes at the spell. "Why didn't you just do that instead of cutting me apart?" she asked, sitting down opposite the man and moving a cookie too.

"What do you mean? Back then? Right. I can't move living creatures. Which means you can… What kind of Class did you unlock? You don't strike me as a studious type. In so little time… Who *are* you?"

The Ascended sat down too, its arms and legs crossed. It did not summon a cookie for itself.

"Ah, to be trapped in a steel shell, unable to appreciate my own culinary wonders."

Ilea gave it a glance. *Trapped in a steel shell?*

"So, why don't you tell us who you are and why you are here?" the Ascended said.

Ilea ate another cookie. "Thank you for the cookies. I'm Lilith. I associate with Ravenhall, the independent one, and Hallowfort in the north. There's something here that I need."

Albert raised his eyebrows, then sighed. "The only thing intricate enough to be tracked through the barriers is that damned key. Maybe we should've just left it somewhere in the ice."

The Ascended ignored his comments. "Lilith. It is interesting to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise," Ilea said with a smile.

The Ascended looked at her. "I am Nes Mor Atul, Navuun of Kohr and a former member of the great Unity, Olym Arcena. You may know the Navuun as Ascended, though I do not abide by that name."

Oh! That's all new. Kohr?

“It’s good to meet an Ascended, or Navuun, that doesn’t attack me immediately,” Ilea said. “I’m interested to learn about your kind.”

“I apologize for the behavior you must’ve seen from another of my kind. But do tell, Lilith. Do you seek the Copper Key? And if so, to what end?”

Ilea considered for a moment. They were talkative, and based on what she had seen and heard so far, they would know a great deal about all kinds of interesting things. This wasn’t what she had expected to find here, but if she played her cards right, she could leave with a lot more than just a Taleen artefact.

There was no need to lie either. Arthur could have killed her years ago if he’d wanted. It wouldn’t be as easy to kill her now, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t try. She wanted to know if she could trust them and what kind of alliances they had.

The problem was, she didn’t know a whole lot about the Ascended, just that they had, at some point, ruled the demon realm, or the Great Salt, as the Mind Weavers called it. They had built the facility that became the Descent, had made the corruption agent that had threatened to destroy Hallowfort, and most importantly, they had supposedly taken one of Elos’ suns from the very skies. That was if Maro and Ilea’s findings in the Descent could be believed.

The Ascended had been at the very core of the conflict some three thousand years ago when humans, dwarves, and elves had united to fight a war against them. Those events were not only connected to the destruction of Rhyvor but also played a central role in the conflict between the Taleen and the elven Domains.

For years, in a bunch of ancient dungeons and facilities, Ilea had found bits and pieces of information related to that conflict, and now she was sitting across from someone who might have been there.

As Ilea let healing flow through her mind to calm herself down and help her focus, she didn’t miss the look that Albert gave her.

“I really am interested in talking to you. I’ve come across a lot of things on my travels that alluded to your kind. But I need to know if I can trust you, for the sake of my allies.” She looked at Albert. “How did you find Cless? And what was the goal with all that? Why were you in that dungeon?”

He glanced at Nes Mor Atul, who gave him a nod.

“You have visited other realms before. I’m interested in how you accomplished that, and if you have any anchors in any of them. It is remarkably difficult and rare to bridge the gap between realms. I’ve spent a large portion of my life studying space magic, and on my travels, I came across stories of people claiming to be from realms entirely different from our own.

“It fascinated me, and after some time, I met my first supposed realm traveler. A human of no great magical talent, but the world he spoke of and the ideas he shared were so different that I felt something of his story must have been true.

“I studied more and found more people like him. They are very rare, though, and, disappointingly, everyone I met had arrived here by accident, by chance. There are other realms out there, of that I was sure by then, but none of those travelers had any knowledge of space magic or any agency in how they arrived here.”

Ilea blinked her eyes. It was the one thing she shared with Cless. Figuring out how she got here was low on her priority list these days, and both the Superfae and the Meadow had mostly answered her questions. A random event of chance, just like Albert described.

“Still, I was very interested in the phenomenon and kept studying it,” the man continued. “Now, I look for fissures in this realm, connections and shifts. You should understand that if you can see the fabric. It has always fascinated me, yes, but now it’s more than that. Anything could come through, monsters or sapients who wish to invade this realm. Sometimes, reasonable beings from other realms show up, willingly or, more often, not.

“Cless could not share any world-changing research with me, but I was happy to save her from a place unknown to her. There was nothing of great interest at the location, but I stayed because of her and taught her for a while. If you hadn’t shown up, I would have taken her to an orphanage somewhere in the Empire.”

“So you look for threats from other realms?”

“Threats and other things. The fabric spans much farther than Elos, and there are all kinds of things out there. Dangers and threats, yes, but also knowledge and magic, tools and potentially”—he glanced at Nes Mor Atul —“even allies.”

Ilea smiled. She had found all of those things in other realms too. Albert didn’t sound like a bad guy, but then she looked at Nes.

“I learned that your kind took one of the suns from Elos. Is that true?”

Nes sighed. “You know a lot for a Shadow. I’m afraid what you’ve learned is true.”

Ilea shifted in her chair and breathed in deep. “I understand that this event… caused the destruction of Rhyvor. Thousands, if not millions, lost their lives. The north became what it is today because of it.”

Nes glanced at Albert.

“She knows of Rhyvor, too,” he sighed.

“What happened back then? You were there, weren’t you?” Ilea asked Nes.

Its white eyes glowed, and its face took on a note of melancholy. “I was. It was… a different time. But since you wish to hear, I’ll tell you about our kind. And our sins.

“Almost four thousand years ago, the brightest minds of the Navuun, in our never-ending pursuit for knowledge, made a fundamental breakthrough. We learned how to harness the power of the sun. And we ripped from our very sky what we once deemed a god, perhaps becoming gods ourselves.

“Kohr did not have the luxury of three suns, and with its loss, our lands went through a change far worse than what happened in some parts of this realm. Our cities were destroyed, our people… changed.”

Ilea looked at her. “Changed? You said your realm was called Kohr. Is that the Great Salt? The demon realm?”

Nes sighed. “It is that now, yes.”

So… is that what they are?

“They were Navuun before, weren’t they? The creatures we call demons.”

Nes didn’t reply.

Albert nodded slightly, grabbing Nes’ hand.

“I’m sorry,” Ilea said.

“It was our doing,” Nes said. “Our choice, though we didn’t know the consequences at the time.”

“As Nes has informed me before, the decision wasn’t quite as unanimous as it sounds in hindsight,” Albert said. “Nor did this happen with a single vote or in the absence of preparation. The sheer fact that their ruling class survived the process, their bodies changed long before, but of their own volition, should tell you what kind of a civilization they were.”

“You admire them,” Ilea said.

“I do.”

“So, they took the sun from their own realm, and then they came here to take one of ours? As a source of energy?”

“Yes. We went to many realms,” Nes said. “But where wills and voices were divided before, you can imagine our great unity after our entire realm was near fully destroyed. Our people turned into monstrous creatures. It was like that for a while, though as we grieved, and as the extent of what we had done settled in, what we had caused…”

She shook her head. “I felt terror. And guilt beyond guilt. It could not happen again.” She paused. “And yet it did. And in the end, it tore apart our Unity. Our Unity and our people. The remnants that were left of it.”

They were all quiet for a long moment.

“You caused all this, then?” Ilea asked eventually. “The north. The storms here?”

“Yes. Untold death and destruction. That is the legacy of the Olym Arcena. We opposed those who pushed to proceed, then we fought them. But it was too late. What was done was done.”

Ilea breathed in deep, then sighed. She tried the tea. A black tea of sorts. It was nice.

She focused on the conversation again.

“So you came here and took one of the suns, the peoples of Elos united and invaded the Great Salt… invaded Kohr. A war like none before it. What happened after?” Ilea asked, remembering the map she had found in the Azarinth temple.

Albert raised his eyebrows. “There was no war, Lilith. Those who invaded Kohr were merely scavengers thinking themselves participants in a war. Underestimated, certainly, but had they faced a united Olym Arcena, not one would have returned. The source was only taken thanks to those working to prevent further destruction.”

“The source? The sun? It was taken then?” Ilea said, her eyes wide.

By the Taleen! That’s what they found in Kohr! That’s what it was all about, and what they tried to hide from the elves. That’s why their war broke out in the first place!

“Oh fuck, that’s such a clusterfuck of a conflict,” she murmured. “Just to clarify. By source, you mean a sun?”

“What remains of one,” Albert said. “A source of almost unlimited energy, capable of powering the impossible.”

“Like an army of Taleen machinery, production facilities, and the mind to control it all.”

It was all falling into place. And now Ilea also knew what was hidden down in Iz. She took a long, shuddering breath.

“You did not know this?” Nes asked.

“No. Maybe I should’ve. The pieces were there, but I guess I found it hard to believe that someone had taken a sun from the sky in the first place, or destroyed it, absorbed it, or whatever it is you did, to make some energy source that could be used more directly.”

“Why do you seek the key, Lilith?” Nes asked, leaning forward slightly.

“You know what it’s used for, don’t you? For the machines that are still being made, long after the dwarves themselves vanished. A weapon aimed at elvenkind.”

“And wasted against the Monarchs and Oracles in their Domains,” Albert said.

“Not against their children. They grow up in strife, slaughtered by machines made for a conflict that is lost to history. It’s not my fight, and I’ll be honest, I’d rather have that source stay hidden, right where it is, but when I came to the north some years ago and found Tremor, I met an elf in conflict with himself. He is now a Cerithil Hunter. A cursed one. And a friend.

“Since that war, and what the Ascended did to Elos, the machines have grown in number. More young elves are killed every year. It should be ended. I thought the keys would be important, but now I know they are central to this conflict.”

“The Cerithil Hunters,” Albert said, glancing at Nes.

“It may be the best outcome,” Nes said. “I admire your involvement, Lilith. Perhaps we are not so unlike each other after all.”

Ilea smiled slightly.

She had just learned a lot. She thought of all the demons she had killed, all the demons that had been summoned to Ravenhall. She thought of the demon realm – Kohr, it was called – and of the demons that had once been Navuun, created when they looked to their own sun for power.

And she knew that the source was still here.

There should be two as well, one from their own realm and one from Elos. The Taleen took one. I wonder where the second one went?

“The twelve keys open that which holds the source, that which was taken. Few of the Ascended know of this, and it’s better that way.” Albert said. “You should be aware, however, that even if you find all the keys, you won’t find the source. None has succeeded in all these thousands of years since the Taleen vanished.”

Way ahead of you.

“How did you get a key, then?” Ilea asked. “And how do you know they used it with eleven others to lock away the sun?”

He looked at her with a tired expression. “Alliances are forged and crumble, but trust is not as easily built, nor is it quickly forgotten. I knew Taleen before they even knew about the Navuun. It was given to me. For safekeeping, though I’d always thought it a danger. And now here we are.”

“Yeah,” Ilea said. “Here we are.”

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THIRTY-SIX

History

“I have kept the key safe, though I always thought it a liability,” Albert said. “The Taleen, however you may view their continued attacks on elven territory, have managed to protect the source for thousands of years, against anyone who has ever had an interest.

“After our conversation and what I’ve glimpsed of your power, perhaps there is a chance that you will succeed. Let’s say we give the key to you and your Cerithil Hunters. What will you do if you succeed? Do you trust the elves you have allied yourself with?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Ilea said. “I’ve only just learned what we might find with the keys, but if I could choose between the source powering thousands of high-level machines made to kill elves and the source being in the possession of the Cerithil Hunters, or even myself or you, I know I wouldn’t choose the machines. How will we keep it safe afterward? We’ll have to figure that out.” She looked at the two of them. “Who else may be interested? Who else would even know about it?”

“The Ascended, of course,” Albert said. “Every single one of them would have hundreds of uses for a source. I doubt the elven Oracles would be particularly interested, but I’ve been wrong about them before. Their motives are as variable and changing as the weather in the Plains. They follow some sort of logic, but I believe it to be magical in nature and have yet to grasp it. Not that I’ve invested much of my time and resources in learning about them.”

“The Olym Arcena had difficulties setting up the various installations near and within the elven Domains,” Nes added. “The Oracles never pursued us as enemies through the realms or outside of their Domains, but entire groups of even nobility were wiped out in their entirety when they set up their installations.”

“I wonder how they felt about what happened in the north, or, indeed, about a sun being taken,” Ilea said.

“It was the only time elven males allied themselves in large numbers not only with other Domains but also with other species. I think that tells us enough,” Albert said.

“Yeah. Also, I was wondering – we’ve been talking about one source, but there were two, weren’t there? What about the other?”

“That is a mystery even to us,” Nes said. “One of the Ascended must’ve secured it and left, but where to and to what end, we do not know.”

Ilea nodded. *They could be lying or holding back some of what they know, though.*

“You mentioned before that the Navuun couldn’t possibly have lost the conflict, but I’ve seen an elven Monarch fight, and I’m pretty sure he would’ve had a chance against the Ascended I met before,” Ilea said. “Even if he held back considerably against me.”

“In a direct battle, as you would most likely conduct, perhaps you are right,” Nes said. “But the Navuun were not warriors like your kind. Not many of us, at least. Magic is merely a tool to create other tools. The bodies we granted ourselves are only one such creation. A war would never be fought in a direct manner. It is foolish to waste energy on such matters when more efficient solutions exist.”

“Right.”

“Humans would be interested in the source, too,” Albert said. “As would the vampire courts in the northwest, beyond the dead patch of frozen land. I doubt the Feynor would care to learn how to use its power, nor would the Mava, or the orcs.

“As for the Dark Protector, I’m not sure, but if any faction besides the elves has members that remember what happened, it’s the Awakened in the north. Though most did not come into existence before the sun was taken – the environment wasn’t as favorable for their kind before.

“Any individual, high-level sapient being would surely be interested. Dragons, Fae, unicorns, and the like, but I doubt any would actively pursue

a search.”

“Unicorns…?” Ilea murmured.

“If you encounter any, I suggest you hide or flee,” the man said seriously. “While the Fae are peaceful, unicorns are the very opposite. And I say that having seen dragons.”

“Noted,” she answered. “So, pretty much everyone would be interested in the source. And if we had it, and that information got out, we’d have a lot of attention on us.”

“Yes.”

She nodded and sighed. It was a lot to think about. She’d have to discuss it all with her team, with the Meadow, and with the Hunters.

“You met an Ascended, then?” Nes asked.

“I met one who was called Vor Elenthir. At least, the implication was there that it was his name.”

“I see. You were lucky it was him. He has little interest in the beings of this realm. What he seeks, however, is the source. Or so we think. He was part of a faction hoping to restore Kohr. We were prepared to fight him if he ever showed up in search of the key.”

“He’s a four-mark. Could you two win that fight?”

“Have you not fought four-marks before?” Albert asked. “I assumed you had. I have. When a species pushes far beyond its norm, it can become surprisingly dangerous.”

“And the Ascended are born close to being a four-mark?”

“Ascended are not born. Navuun are born. Or, rather, *were* born,” Nes said. “The bodies of the Ascended are forged.”

“I have to say, I do like my fleshy body.”

“I understand. Much is lost, and much is gained.”

“You mentioned a place called Tremor?” Albert said.

Ilea smiled. “Yeah. The capital of Rhyvor. Are you familiar with it?”

He gave her a long look. “I am. It was once my home.”

“It was?”

Then he might be familiar with Maro and Elana. I guess the world being small doesn’t only apply to Earth.

“Yes. It was a beautiful place. One of the realm travelers I mentioned had such knowledge of agriculture that we could cultivate new variants of grapes. We became famous for our wine. I remember the time fondly.”

Ilea nodded, then froze.

Wait. That seems familiar.

Elana had told her about someone, someone who'd always been interested in realm travelers and space magic. Someone named Scipio. An old friend and party member of both Maro and Elana.

He didn't just know them – he'd been their friend.

She looked at the man.

"What?" he asked.

"You're Scipio."

His eyes went wide. "How? How do you know that name?"

"Oh my," Nes said.

"I found you!" Ilea said and laughed. "I've already met you!"

Albert, or Scipio, stood up. "Explain yourself!"

"It's fine, I'll tell you," Ilea said.

Nes touched Albert's back, and he calmed down.

"These were your lands once, then, weren't they? Human lands," Ilea said.

"A frontier, then and now," Albert said, sitting again. "Though they weren't quite as dangerous when we started building settlements."

"Rhyvor. I stumbled upon the Tremor dungeon in my travels."

"I see. The capital remained in some form. Then you must've found records of me, or a portrait, perhaps?"

Ilea paused, looking at him before she smiled. "No. I found Maro and Elana."

"Their graves? Why would they mention me?"

"No, not their graves. They're alive and well."

He blinked his eyes a few times, staring into nothing and then back at her. "WHAT?!" he exclaimed, lifting a hand and pointing at her. "You… you're fabricating this. Was any of what you said true at all? You're disguised somehow, aren't you?!"

"She's not disguised, dear," Nes said, trying to calm him down.

"I'm not," Ilea said. "But I was in Tremor. Maro Invalar, King of Rhyvor, sacrificed himself at the end of some local war, taking over the dead Kingsguard and most of the dead knights of Rhyvor, fighting off the invaders and defending the capital."

"You need more proof than that to support such a ludicrous story," Albert said.

“I mean, I don’t *have* to convince you, but I’ll try. Hmm… something personal, then. Maro didn’t actually want to be king; he was just super charismatic. I don’t really get that part – he can be kind of an ass. Elana was the one really ruling. He was often off on adventures and the like.

“He did give me this,” she said, revealing the Legacy of Rhyvor, “but I suppose I could’ve just looted it somewhere. We investigated the Soul Rippers, powerful monsters that flooded the local dungeons. The same thing happened in many areas of Rhyvor. Based on runes I found later, I think the Ascended were responsible for their summoning.”

“That’s… true, all of it,” Albert said slowly. “But I still find it hard to believe. Thousands of years… and they did nothing?”

“Well, Maro was stuck in the machine controlling the knights, which were later taken over by the city-turned-dungeon. Fucked up, but I don’t think he expected to actually succeed. Elana took care of him. She was… angry. I mean, it’s reasonable, given her situation. I’m glad we got them out in the end. How do you feel about them? And is Scipio your real name, then?”

“It is. And it’s been so long, I barely remember their faces,” he said quietly. “But a part of me… would like to see them again. We were adventurers together, a very, very long time ago. When we were all still young, so full of stupidity and idealism. I parted ways with them and Rhyvor many years before that idiot was declared king.” He laughed. “I knew immediately it was Elana’s doing.”

“Have you been to Hallowfort?”

“You mentioned it before. A settlement of Awakened in the north, is it not? I have heard whispers but have yet to find its location. Is it within the Dark Protector’s domain?”

“It’s independent. And Elana has joined its council.”

“Elana, part of a council of Awakened? That is… not something I’d expected. But I suppose Rhyvor was her home, as it was mine.” He breathed in deep. “I suppose it’s part of why we’re still in the North, too.”

He glanced at Nes, who squeezed his hand.

“Is Maro still by her side?”

“He’s… no. I have no idea where he is. He was in Asila some time ago, but who knows where he is now.”

“You’re aware of how dangerous that could be? That man has a way of influencing people.”

“Tell me about it. Some kind of hidden Charisma stat,” Ilea murmured.

Scipio nodded, the gesture far more casual than any before. “I was sure he wasn’t human. I considered some kind of mind magic creature hiding in his skin, but I never found conclusive evidence.”

“You could find him and ask. I think it would blow his mind to find out you’re still around.”

“I’d like to, but no. Not with everything on the line. Maro can’t keep secrets, nor would he want to be involved in the things I know. Elana, though, maybe.”

“With everything on the line? Right, what is it that you do here? I assume you’re not just in hiding.”

Nes and Scipio looked at each other.

“She’s already found us,” Nes said.

He crossed his arms. “We can relocate.”

Nes held his arm and moved a little closer. “We can also trust, and maybe find allies.”

Scipio grumbled something and sighed, looking at his hands.

“There is a mark on her, you know,” Nes said.

He glanced at Ilea, who cocked her head to the side. “A mark?”

“Are you not aware? It is a mark on your essence. From a rare and powerful creature of this world.”

“Oh! The Fae. Right, I forgot about that,” Ilea said. The Fae had given her a mark at some point. Something that said ‘friend’ or ‘friendly’ or something of the like.

“A Fae has marked her as trustworthy and kind.”

“A Fae. You’ve met a Fae?” Scipio asked.

“Several. And the Superfae. That was something.”

Scipio opened his eyes wide. “That’s how you got your space magic…”

“Initially, yes.”

“But the ones I encountered did not communicate, nor did they seem interested in me in any way,” he said. “How did you of all people, no offense, manage to gain their trust?”

“Offense taken,” Ilea grinned. “Maybe you just weren’t *violent* enough.”

“They were some of the most peaceful creatures I encountered on my travels,” he said in a confused tone.

“Shame. Their realm really was quite unforgettable.”

“You… how did you get there? What did you do? Tell me!” he said, getting louder and closer, touching her shoulder at one point before he retreated, pushing a hand through his hair.

Ilea laughed and found Nes joining in.

“That’s quite something,” Nes said.

Scipio ignored them, murmuring about the Fae. “The things we could learn… How? Can you contact them? Do you have a way? To return?”

Ilea smiled. “Honestly, I don’t think so. It felt like a one-time thing. I only really befriended one of their parts, though if you visit Hallowfort and meet the Meadow, you might run into Violence, too.”

“Violence?”

“That’s its name. Or Baron Violence, or the Great Ender of Worlds, or the Great Destroyer of Eyes.”

“You’re kidding. No, you’re not… Don’t answer that.”

“Just don’t try to capture the guy. I’d take great offense. And hunt you to the end of the world.”

He waved her off. “Any creature with more than two cells in its brain understands the fallacy of such an action against such beings as Fae or dragons.”

“Eh… do you know Audur, per chance?” Ilea asked, scratching the back of her head.

“The Guardian of the West. I have heard of her. Best to avoid her domain entirely – she’s apparently very easily angered and is known to hold on to grudges for millennia.”

“Shit.”

The man stared at her for a full five seconds. “Well. Good luck with that.”

“Thanks,” Ilea said. “I just have to reach a suitable level before she decides to find me.”

“If anyone can do it, I’m sure it’ll be you,” Nes said confidently. “Despite your weak magical affinity, I was always fascinated with the drive and adaptability humanity showed.”

“It’s really just healing and resistances,” Ilea said. “And a lot of fighting and killing and training. A lot of that.”

Nes seemed to smile. “Indeed. You were born without a Class, after all.”

“Speaking of that, what were the Navuun like?” Ilea asked. “And what type of being were they? They were mammals, I assume?”

“We were. Pregnancy takes much longer than what you humans require, and it is rare. Most were born at close to level two hundred, with high affinities for mind magic, space magic, and other variations depending on the parents’ genetics.

“My body now, of course, is not that of a Navuun, and I did not have to fight the same struggle as you to reach the power I now wield. Though I suppose as a civilization, the pursuit of technological advances is a struggle all on its own.”

“It’s cool to know that there are other ways to become a high-level being, I’ll say that at least,” Ilea said.

“I agree. The ability to shape magic and create change in the universe is a wonderful gift,” Nes said. “Now, you mentioned someone called the Meadow?”

“Yes. A tree friend I made.”

“By the gods,” Scipio murmured.

Nes looked at Ilea, her eyes glowing slightly. “Scipio, dear. We should tell her about what we do here. She seems well-connected.”

“I suppose she does,” he said. “But do tell, what is this tree friend of yours?”

“It’s my space magic teacher and now the guardian of Hallowfort. It might be the answer to the source question, too. No offense, but I think the Meadow could wipe the floor with all three of us together. It’s a four-mark being I found on Erendar.”

“The moon you mentioned, with the creatures to hunt? You brought a sapient four-mark being here?” Scipio asked.

“I did. So, what are you working on?”

“Alright,” Scipio said with finality, looking at Nes. “Come, let us show you.”

Ilea followed them down into the cellar where she had found the containers.

“Navuun,” Scipio said. “The ones saved before their sun was taken.”

Ilea looked around. “They’re dead.”

“Not quite,” Nes said. “No longer able to sustain themselves, they were put into a near-perfect stasis. They are what remain of my kind, and we aim to bring them back to life. That is our purpose here.”

“I see.” She could empathize with her. “That’s a noble cause. Why here in the north? It seems like a dangerous location, though I guess you’re well

hidden. Because of the proximity to Rhyvor?”

“We know much about their physiology, and they require a lot more mana in their environment than humans do,” Scipio said. “The north is appropriate, but the conditions have to be perfect, especially upon their waking.”

“They’re going to have a shock when they wake up after all these years, that much is sure,” Ilea said.

“These are children, Lilith,” Nes said. “Young enough to remember very little.”

“I see,” Ilea said. “Well, you talked about allies and connections. I think we may be able to help each other.”

“I already feel reasonably comfortable giving you the key,” Scipio said. “It’s as safe with you as it is with us, and it would help keep us hidden if that artifact wasn’t here.”

“I wasn’t just talking about the key, Scipio. Both of you are immensely powerful and knowledgeable. I understand that you’re probably very focused on your goal here, but I think cooperation always leads to better results.

“There are powerful and knowledgeable beings in Hallowfort and Ravenhall. If you’re interested, I recommend you visit the Meadow, even just for a talk. I’m sure you would all be able to share potential insights that would help everyone.”

“We will consider it,” Scipio said.

“You talk of your allies, but what about you?” Nes said. “You are a high-level space mage yourself.”

Ilea smiled. “I’m mostly just in it for the exploration and fighting. I’m getting better at the magic stuff, but I’m definitely not a scholar or researcher. I go out there and find interesting things and beings, like yourselves, and then I suppose I bring them together.

“That’s something I can do, because I think at the end of the day we all want to live a happy and fulfilled life. And it’s easier to do that with friends and safe havens around. And maybe some absurdly powerful beings to protect those places.”

Nes and Scipio gave each other a look.

“Speaking of friends, I didn’t come here alone. The message I sent before, did that go out? Otherwise, they’ll breach the barrier at some point to look for me.”

“Your spell went through,” Scipio said. “I was simply notified of its use.”

“I see. That’s good, then. I told them to stand down and wait.”

“I would prefer it if this location wasn’t made known to anyone else. The same goes for anything you’ve learned here. Do you trust those friends?”

Ilea gave it some thought. “I’m not a good liar, but I’ll make something up. I don’t think it’s a good idea for them to know the details. I’ll have to think about what to tell them.”

Verena and Pierce didn’t need to know about the source or the people she had found. She didn’t want to keep Feyrair in the dark, but she’d find a time to talk to him when the Elders weren’t around.

“The fewer who learn of us, the better,” Scipio said. “Even if you trust them, it would mean a lot if you kept our presence here to yourself.”

“I understand.” She folded her arms and looked at Scipio. “Can you actually travel through realms?”

“If you’re asking if I can form a fissure myself, the answer is no. There are ways in theory, but they require a lot of energy, the sacrifice of essence, as is the case in blood magic, or simply an unfathomable amount of preparation and perfect execution.

“As there are always two or more realms involved, including the fabric that connects all, the conditions need to be perfect. It’s a different story when you have access to two realms or a magically ingrained location in the fabric.”

“This is one of his favorite topics,” Nes interjected.

“It is,” Scipio smiled. “Should I continue?”

“Please do,” Ilea said.

“Very well. Two anchors in two realms are not so different from two points in the same one, though more energy is required to travel between them. I have developed ways to detect shifts and fissures. One of the most reliable ways to travel to unknown realms is still a simple occurrence of chance, as infuriating as that is to accept.

“No matter what you do or try, should you ever choose to follow such a trail, you must have an anchor here so you don’t get stranded. I have seen worlds filled with creatures perhaps equal to the very dragons that rule the skies far to the north of here.”

Ilea smiled.

New hunting grounds for the future. Neat.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

The Lore Man Cometh

“Thank you for the lesson,” Ilea said.

“Of course,” Scipio said. “And do let me know if you come across any interesting realms, and if you find a way to return there. I’m always interested in new places.”

“I can do that, though there’s the question of how I can reach you. And shall we discuss how to handle the key now as well?”

Nes summoned the item into her hands. “We could simply give it to you, though, while I trust you to an extent, perhaps we could also trade for it?”

“You’re thinking of something specific? I doubt you’re interested in gold or cake.”

“Indeed not. We’ve been around for a long time, Lilith, and our purpose here, though few know of it, is not supported by all. We have to consider enemies that may still hold animosity. And not only because of what we try to accomplish here.

“The conflict between our two realms may be long past, but many beings age little and forget less. You are a being of strife. One that finds enjoyment and purpose in the pursuit of… meaningful battle?”

“Yeah, I suppose I am,” Ilea answered.

I can see what she’s going for.

“Then perhaps this aligns with what I would ask of you. Should we be found by our enemies, whoever and whatever they might be, I would ask

for your assistance. In a more… practical manner. A shield and sword," she said, "to fight by our side in defense of our lives and our home."

"Sure. Whatever might come looking for you, I'm sure it would be an interesting fight. I'll simply come through and make up my own mind when I see it."

"That is all I ask," Nes said.

Scipio nodded.

"Then it is decided," the Navuun added, extending a branch of steel from her hand to deliver the key.

Ilea took it with an ashen limb, identifying the object as soon as she touched it.

[The Copper Key – Ancient Quality]

"How will we be able to contact you?" Scipio said. "And how will you arrive in time?"

"If you have no easy way, I have a spell to mark people. I suggest I use that on one of you. I'll be able to track you, and we can exchange ten words, in each direction, every day."

"I'd prefer not to be tracked," Scipio said.

"I do not mind such a mark," Nes said.

"I'm sure you two can figure out a way to suppress the tracking," Ilea said. "As for how I can get here in time… let that be my concern."

Scipio gave her a knowing look. "If you plan to set any anchors, do so outside of the enchantments placed on this facility. Better do it a reasonable distance away, in case someone finds it or comes looking for you instead of us."

Already knows what I plan to do. Well, I guess it's obvious to another space mage. Kind of cool to meet another one, though.

She didn't really want to use up one of her two remaining destinations for them, but the location offered far more than just fulfilling her part of the deal. This was the north north, after all; it was a place she wanted to explore anyway.

Ilea smiled. "Yeah, I'll be here within a minute or two. If something wipes you out faster than that, I doubt I'd be able to make much of a difference."

"Yet," Nes said.

“I’m inclined to agree,” Scipio said. “Reaching five hundred in such a short span of time. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised by someone using Azarinth magic.”

“I know. I’m pretty great,” Ilea said. “Wait. You know about the Azarinth Order? I mean, of course you do. They were there.”

“They were. And I do. I also know they’re extinct, and you don’t strike me as someone trained by them, though you use their magic. How do you relate to them?”

“I stumbled into one of their temples, got stuck, and ate their elixir. That’s how it all started.”

“I assumed it was something like that.”

“They must have been super strong, no? If even you are familiar with their magic. With their healing classes, I’d assume they were able to take on most other groups in the Plains.”

“And they did,” Scipio said. “But the human lands were more vast at the time, both in the north and in the south. The Isanna Desert hasn’t always been quite as far-reaching or uninhabitable as it is now. There has been a decline in humanity’s power since the borderlands became this hostile. Any undertaking to push them back is unreasonably expensive and dangerous now, while it was a simple thing for any group of adventurers back in my younger years.”

“I mean, you were still the same humans, though,” she said. “Right?”

“Yes. But the monster populations, especially in the frontiers, were a lot more diverse, both in abilities and power. It’s far more difficult to find reasonable hunting grounds for someone in the high two hundreds these days. Reaching level three hundred is a rarity, and one has to brave far more dangerous environments. Either way, I imagine the human armies of this age would hardly be accepted as allies by the ancient Taleen or elven males.”

Interesting. So the gap was less extreme back then? I remember going north for the first time. Even I nearly died a few times.

“Besides,” he continued, “humanity has enjoyed long-lasting, relative peace for millennia, excluding wars amongst themselves, but you would know how little that benefits the overall strength of our species. We have perfected life behind our city walls now, and most humans don’t see a level two hundred monster in their lifetime.

“They were far more common back then, as other species were more present, fueling competition, opportunities, and the drive and necessity to advance. I don’t think it’s better or worse today. We have simply adapted to the current circumstances.”

Ilea listened. It was interesting to learn how things had changed since the sun was taken. She supposed that, generally, there really wasn’t all that much of a need for people to brave the wilderness and push beyond level two hundred. The increased lifespan was a big motivator, but beyond a certain point, the risk likely outweighed the reward for many.

“Do you know what happened to the Azarinth Order? Why they’re not around anymore?”

“They, much like other factions who joined the invasion of Kohr, lost many of their members. If you’ve been there, you’ll know the environment. Now imagine the occasional Ascended defending against the invaders, coupled with elven mages and Taleen with little regard for collateral damage. Everyone hoped to scavenge the technology of the Navuun. The bloodbath only grew more intense as the remaining Ascended retreated or left.”

“The Azarinth were healers, their magic arcane in nature,” Nes continued. “I remember I came across a battlefield outside a facility owned by Sehl Naroth. Thousands of humans, elves, and dwarves had been slaughtered by his creations. Like many of our kind, he scrambled to gather his research and possessions before leaving for a realm of his choice. I was surprised to find that many had not died to his creations but to a battle that must’ve ensued afterward, once he had left and his weapons were no longer a danger to the gathered forces. I surmised that they must’ve fought each other to obtain what he had left behind.”

“It sounds like a very eventful time,” Ilea said. “Kohr seemed pretty desolate when I was there.”

“It is,” Nes said. “The surface is barely able to sustain life now, and the waters are near-devoid of nutrients. Only high-level creatures of magic remain in the depths.”

“The conflicts starting in Kohr spilled back into Elos once the Ascended were deemed defeated,” Scipio added. “You’re aware of the ongoing conflict between the Taleen and elves, but while most of humanity has forgotten that long past era, their factions and countries were not without struggles.

“I think that at least as many lives were lost in the battles that followed as during the invasion itself. And those are perhaps still small numbers compared to what caused the invasion in the first place. But I know little about the destruction of all of Rhyvor, the southern desert kingdoms, the lands beyond the seas, and all the species affected.”

“I’ve been wondering,” Ilea said. “Nobody in the Plains seems to remember the sun being taken. It seems reasonable to assume that at least some records would remain.”

Scipio glanced at Nes. “That is strange indeed.”

“Are you responsible for that?” Ilea asked.

“No. I believe knowledge should not be destroyed. It should be preserved. Nor do I see a reason why anyone would care about humanity remembering the disappearance of a sun.”

“Yeah, but you’ve noticed the same thing?”

“I’ve not actively tracked the knowledge stored about that era. I still remember the event. Nobody who experienced it could ever forget,” Scipio said. “But while we humans do write down many things, knowledge does get lost. One magic is deemed heresy, a king has a grudge against a certain hair color, a librarian dislikes women, or men, a hero turns out to be anything but heroic.

“It takes a lot of effort and time to gather and preserve knowledge, and so very little to destroy it. You’re right, however. If what you say is true, for such a far-reaching event, more knowledge should remain. I could look into it.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Ilea said.

And I could check if other species have records as well. Not sure if the elves keep libraries.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

Ice

“I’ve learned quite a lot today,” Ilea said. “But I think I should check in with the others before they decide to rush in.”

“The mark you mentioned?” Nes asked.

“Right,” Ilea said, reaching out with her hand. Nes touched her, and she set the mark.

“A marvelous spell,” Nes commented.

“This Meadow of yours, how can we find it?” Scipio asked.

“Just go to Hallowfort. I could lead you there… Oh, actually, you know the location of Tremor?”

“I think I could find it, yes.”

“Great, then just go there, and the Meadow will be in touch. I’ll let it know about you.”

“I’m more and more interested in what this being is.”

Ilea smiled.

“How should we identify ourselves?” Nes asked.

“Just mention Lilith. But I mean, you’re an Ascended, and he’s a three-mark space mage. I don’t think you could be mistaken for anyone else,” she said, heading toward the exit. “Now, what do I tell the others…?”

“Do you need a few spells to chase you?” Scipio asked.

“No, no, I think I’ll be fine,” Ilea said. “So this is goodbye, then. For now. I look forward to hearing from you.”

“As do we,” Nes answered. “You are welcome here, Lilith.”

“Thank you, Nes Mor Atul. And Scipio, I’ll see you around.”

With that, Ilea vanished through the enchantments. She continued onward, soon reappearing next to her allies.

“We’re leaving,” she said and moved them away, teleporting them a few times up the mountain before finally stopping and turning to look back down at where they’d come from. “I got the key, but I might’ve woken up whoever it belonged to. And no, we don’t want to fight it.”

I guess they were already awake, but we don’t want to fight them either way.

“How boring,” Feyrair and Pierce said at the same time. They glanced at each other, both likely annoyed that they would say the same thing.

Ilea used the moment to set her third-tier Transfer destination before she summoned the locator.

“Nothing seems to be following,” Verena said.

“Good,” Ilea said. “So, we continue? The closest key is north,” she added, looking toward the high-reaching mountains. She caught a glimpse of a set of wings between two mountains before they vanished behind a snow-covered summit.

Another key up here, then. Good.

The three gave their assent, and Ilea took the lead as they traveled northward.

They didn’t question me even for a moment. Now I feel a bit dirty. Oh well. Not like I owe the Elders every secret that I have.

They traveled for a while, flying through frozen valleys and past cliffs and mountainsides.

“You okay?” she asked, looking at the two Elders. They were covered in ice, their breathing increasingly strained.

“I’m fine,” Pierce said.

Verena burned a little brighter. “Trying not to attract attention.”

Ilea stopped. “Oh. I think we’re here anyway,” she said.

The locator was pointing down toward solid stone. She couldn’t see anything in her dominion, so she formed an ash drill before she started digging.

Pierce formed a metal dome above them once the hole was big enough, shivering as lightning flowed through her. “Much better,” she sighed as Verena and Feyrair stepped close to her, both on fire.

Ilea had noticed the colder temperatures, but after her experiences in Erendar, the ice here hardly bothered her. *It doesn't seem to be close by yet*, she thought, checking the locator as her ash shattered and ground through stone.

"How many more do we need, anyway?" Pierce asked. "We've already found four."

"Not having fun?" Fey asked.

"All we've found are some empty ruins and unreasonably powerful enemies. I thought I'd get to join some epic battles, not loot abandoned caves or be chased by literal dragons."

Oh, we've found a lot more than that. An Ascended living up here with a human. I'm excited to hear what the Meadow thinks, and everyone else. I really hope I can trust them, but I have a good feeling, and they did give me the key.

She checked the mark she had set on Nes. Similar to how Violence's location was often obscured, she couldn't quite discern Nes' location, but the mark was there.

The others could learn a whole lot from those two, I'm sure of it.

And man, the keys open up the way to the source?

Let's not think about that right now.

"If you were a higher level, it could've been us chasing the dragon," Ilea said.

The woman huffed. "Even you couldn't fight that thing, how am I supposed to keep up?"

"You go and fight stronger b—"

Ilea stopped herself as the ground broke open, revealing a bright underground tunnel, one she hadn't perceived within her dominion.

"This place didn't show up in my perception," she whispered, looking down into the light blue environment.

As the others quieted down, Ilea tried to figure out why her dominion hadn't been able to pierce through. There were no enchantments she could discern, just a faint glow of magic. The density in the area was high in general.

"It's even colder down there," Pierce said.

"It is," Ilea said before jumping down into a perfectly rectangular tunnel. Blue streaks of light flowed through the translucent walls made of what looked like ice.

‘ding’ You have entered the City of Glass dungeon

When she touched the wall, ice spread onto her ash before her body fought back, preventing further freezing.

“It’s a dungeon,” she said. “Good place to level Ice Resistance, if you three don’t have that maxed out already.”

As she only had one point currently available, Ilea didn’t plan to push her own resistance to the third tier.

Verena jumped down next, her boots instantly starting to freeze over as she landed on the ground. Her fires intensified, keeping the frost off her without melting the floor.

Feyrair didn’t seem to be bothered at all, while Pierce simply decided to float with constant lightning flowing over her armor to keep the cold air from damaging her.

“Farther down,” Ilea told them, following the corridor for a while. Her dominion could only push through the weird, magical fog for about two meters before her perception blurred slightly. Her eyes, however, worked normally.

Soon, she spotted a set of icy stairs, heading deeper.

Stairs, hmm? Now, what are we going to find down here?

The stairs led them into an expansive hall, mists of magic flowing through the air and the walls, with frozen monsters and people scattered throughout. It looked like some kind of gruesome gallery of frozen statues, all of them locked in some kind of battle pose. The detail, color, and Ilea’s perception all told her that all of them were real bodies.

Ilea checked them with her healing and dominion but found nothing indicating that they were still alive or constructs that would suddenly attack, as she kind of expected. They scanned the hall, looking for whatever creature had frozen these beings.

“Invaders in our halls…”

As a whisper flowed through the area, a block of ice fell to block the entrance to the stairs they had come down. Ilea blinked near the block and punched it with Archon Strike, Tempered Seal exploding a moment later, while the others prepared to fight.

“Nonono, please don’t leave already!” another voice said, still with a whisper-like quality but less distorted.

“You will find death here,” the first whisperer said.

“They could be of use! For the ritual…” said the less distorted voice.

“Hmm. Yes. A gauntlet, then. To test their strength. You, invaders, stay and fight,” the first voice said.

“And entertain! You may find it rewarding!” a third voice said, this one much higher-pitched.

Ilea turned around and found three figures floating above the field of statues, humanoid wisps of blue light and freezing air. They glowed with magical energy that reminded Ilea of Maro, only much more intense.

[Frozen Lich Fragment – lvl ????]
[Frozen Lich Fragment – lvl ???]
[Frozen Lich Fragment – lvl ????]

The first two were close to one thousand, the first a little over and the second just under, the third a few hundred levels higher. She could barely tell them apart other than by their levels. The first one was floating with a confident pose, eyes glowering. The second seemed a little slumped, its eyes dim. The third was smaller than the others and floated a little behind them. This one seemed more curious than anything else.

The feeling I get from their magic is more akin to that of four-mark monsters rather than sapients. Something about them feels off.

Ilea noted that the damage she had dealt to the entrance had already disappeared. The wall was perfectly smooth again, like the rest of the hall, her memory alone informing her where the entrance had once been.

“Who are you people?” she asked, stepping past her comrades. The Elders looked a little more apprehensive than Feyrair, who seemed intrigued. She felt similarly.

“Hmm, yes, I like that one. An elf, so far from home! With interesting fires… and something else, something strong,” the smallest of the three said in its high-pitched tone. “You will walk the Path of the Owl!”

“We’re not going to walk any—” Ilea began, but Feyrair was already gone, along with the smallest of the three Lich Fragments.

“You two look scared. I too was scared. You will walk the Path of Pain, and I shall tell you of our… cursed fate. Follow me,” the dejected-looking being whispered. It paused for a moment, as if it had forgotten something. Then it activated its spell, and the two Elders vanished.

Ilea attached herself to the being who had teleported Verena and Pierce away, appearing in another hall with dozens of paintings on the walls, with writing set in frozen plates in front of the museum-like exhibits. Much of the writing was faded, and some stone tablets lay shattered, while others were in the process of being put back together.

The Lich Fragment looked at her with some confusion.

“Please. I do not believe you were invited here, but perhaps after you finish your own path, I may tell you of our fate,” it said as the last of them appeared next to it.

“You are suitable,” it whispered in a quiet tone, “for the Path of Death.”

It tried to teleport her, but Ilea resisted. “I’m not going anywhere if you don’t tell me what this is about.”

“It’s a gauntlet. And I have a challenge for you, battle healer,” the fragment said. “You wish to test your strength, do you not?”

It looks like the other one is ready to teach Pierce and Verena some history. What the hell is all this? What did we stumble into?

She glanced at the tablets but found the language unknown to her.

“We can take this one,” Pierce said.

The dejected spirit looked at her, seemingly smiling slightly. There was a tinge of sadness in the expression, though Ilea had a hard time reading it.

Ilea sighed and looked at the last fragment, the one that had tried to move her. “Alright, I’ll play along. Show me the Path of Death, then.”

It teleported Ilea back into the first hall.

“So, who are you?” she asked the floating Lich Fragment.

Ilea heard ice cracking, and she glanced over at one of the frozen statues. Blue eyes were opening within the solid confines, their focus on her.

“I am death to our enemies and protector of our home,” the Lich Fragment whispered. As the sound echoed through the room, all the statues cracked, shining blue eyes opening and figures starting to move within.

Ilea displaced herself next to the floating creature, blasting Embered Heart out in a sphere. It burned through the flying form of the whispering Lich Fragment, which wailed in pain. Ilea watched a shadow fly into the frozen walls, two shining blue eyes suddenly staring at her from within.

“Good, you do not hesitate, you do not fear, and you strike at the heart. Now show me, wanderer, what you can do,” it said.

Ilea found herself unable to pierce the ground with displacement or her dominion; the distance to the next open area was likely too far, or the fragments' magic was keeping her in the room. Her Space Awareness suggested the former; she saw no aura or spell working against her abilities. Which meant she could either play along or use her third-tier Transfer.

It doesn't seem too dangerous so far. The fragments are powerful, but they feel more in the league of monster four-marks rather than the Monarch or the Meadow. Strange.

Guess I'll find out what they want, she thought, looking at the beings as they stepped out of the ice. *There may be some levels to be gained here as well.*

[Undead Wyrm – lvl ???]
[Undead Warrior – lvl 248]
[Undead Python – lvl 218]
[Undead Blight Summoner – lvl ???]

She set her body alight with Flame of Creation and rushed through the beings, her burning ash ripping through the weaker monsters like steel through paper. She used her Valkyrie skills as much as possible without letting the creatures hit her more than they managed on their own. Ilea simply doubted they would be able to deal any significant damage, even those close to level five hundred.

The snake was sliced apart into chunks; the blight summoner, a large ooze-like flesh monster with several eyes, moaned as it was eaten alive by white flames; after the warrior was punched a few times, all of its bones were broken and splintered, unable to attack or even walk; and the undead wyrm simply couldn't keep up with Ilea's flying form.

Her ashen spears broke through its scale armor, heat exploding within the death magic creature. The being was far smaller than the scorching variant she had fought on the Krahen Isles. Barely a minute had passed, and nearly a hundred creatures in the entrance hall had already been sliced apart, white flames clinging to their remains as the ashen warrior landed amongst them.

Her marks informed her that, several kilometers deeper in the mountain, Feyrair was progressing slowly. Verena was still in the same place she had

been before. Either would likely call for her if they were in significant danger. She couldn't teleport there, but she could start digging.

"Do I win the game?" she asked.

Ilea expected another group of creatures to come out of the walls, ground, or ceiling, or that the Lich Fragment would attack her directly. She watched the creature work its way out of the ice wall, pushing with some difficulty until it plopped out with a cracking sound.

"Yes. You wield power like few I've witnessed before," it whispered. "My name is… Death, and you may be suitable, wanderer. Come, come, to the next challenge!"

It hesitated at its name?

Ilea narrowed her eyes at the creature. "Do the others have to fight monsters, too?"

"I do not care about the other paths," Death said.

"I see," Ilea said. "You do this to everything that finds your dungeon, then?"

"Of course. It's rare enough!"

"For what purpose?"

Death glowered at her. "Prove yourself, and you may find out."

Ilea smiled as she cracked her neck. "I do hope you can make this interesting for me."

As a block of ice melted away near one of the walls, the Lich Fragment seemed to grin, and Ilea followed the strange being into the next hall.

At least there's finally something to fight. And it's not a dragon.

* * *

'ding' You have defeated [Undead Wyrm – lvl 628]

…

'ding' You have defeated [Undead Python – lvl 218]

'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 466 – 1 stat point awarded

"I'm happy to fight more," Ilea said after checking her messages. "I hope they're a bit more of a challenge than the last ones," she added, getting into

the mood of the place. “I plan to cleanse this whole dungeon of undead, after all. Don’t hold back, Mr. Death.”

The creature laughed, its eyes flashing bright as it led her into the next hall, a massive chunk of ice standing in the center, the frozen remains of an enormous Wyvern within.

“You have spirit! You would’ve been a great warrior of… of…” It shook its head. “Now, you get the honor of facing this champion,” it said, spreading its arms wide. “You have asked for a challenge, and you shall receive!”

The ice cracked.

Ilea watched the Wyvern’s eyes open, blue like the undead she had fought before. Its body was covered in black scales, and bloody remains hung from its large mouth. Purple flames began to spread within the ice, which cracked and burst as the being roared.

[Winged Death of the North – lvl ????]

They caught a four-mark?

It was close to level one thousand and, seemingly, just as stupid as a Bluetail as it charged at her without a second thought. She charged Archon Strike and welcomed its open beak, which was about the size of her body, with a heavy punch.

Even as arcane energy sizzled through its head, the creature didn’t stop, so Ilea dodged above it and onto its back. An explosion of heat vibrated through its head as she punched its neck, charging heat all the while. A bed of ash fell onto the monster, set alight by Flame of Creation a moment later.

Ilea was sent flying by a burst of death magic, a few layers of her ash decayed away by the magical blast. She moved her wings and landed about thirty meters away, sliding to a halt on the clear ice floor.

The flames had gone from its back as the creature turned and looked at her with dead eyes, its movements more apprehensive now, before it formed a dozen small spheres of purple flame.

Ilea could see them coming, stepping aside when the first sphere vanished and reappeared behind her. The explosion cracked the ice, heat and death magic roaring outward as she twirled away. A bit of ash moved away from her shoulder and took the brunt of the flames, the rest consumed by her own fires.

If only my Death Magic Resistance wasn't maxed out yet, she thought, glancing toward the Lich Fragment, once again ensconced within the ice wall, staring out with its two blue eyes.

"I hope that's not all this thing can do?" she taunted.

A laughing sound came from the wall as the rest of the spheres vanished.

Ilea simply crouched, her wings covering her front as explosions thundered around her. Blood dripped down and mixed with the melting ice as she stood up again, her wings reforming, the wounds on her back and face healing. She grinned, though the insides of her mouth were visible.

Slowed healing from the death magic?

She acknowledged the slight challenge before she dodged to the side, having felt the beam of purple energy come for her. It expanded, turning into an outright torrent the creature could hardly control.

Ilea avoided it, teleporting past and closer to the creature, holding out her arm. As she watched it bring the beam back toward her, she released Embered Heart in a bright cone at the Wyvern's open maw.

Heat and flames burned into its dead skin as their spells collided, a bright explosion slamming the creature back into the wall, while Ilea reeled back as some of her mantle was brushed away, ashen limbs digging into the ground to stop her momentum.

She pushed herself forward and smiled, her eyes focused on the creature as it slowly stood up, its jaw hanging loosely where her beam had melted its skin. Arcane energy gathered in her fist as she walked toward it.

Whatever the fuck we've found here, I'm going to squeeze every level out of it that I can.

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THIRTY-NINE

Gauntlet

Ilea rushed past the beam, having to tank it for the last few meters. She could feel her ash getting stripped away, her skin bathed in the death magic, slowly decaying. Her fist came surging in for an uppercut, slamming into the monster's barely attached jaw. Its mouth snapped shut, and the rest of its spell burst out through the sides.

She spread her ash and set it alight, her wounds slowly recovering as she changed her strikes to purely physical attacks. Her next fist sent splintered teeth flying to each side, and she jumped higher in the air before she aimed for its eyes.

Flesh was squashed and bones were broken, each strike sending vibrations through her arms. Ilea felt her own muscles ripping and tearing, though the injuries healed faster than the ones caused by the monster's spells.

Ilea jumped back when she got some confusing feedback from her precognition, cocking her head to the side as she watched the creature's eyes glow with purple flames. Dark blood dripped down from its mangled jaw. She was preparing to attack when she tasted blood in her mouth, some of it dripping to the ground.

Hmm.

Then she saw a magical connection within her dominion. "Now what's that about?" she asked as the monster charged at her, purple flames forming

on its whole body. Ilea watched as her mantle decayed, her skin fighting against death magic that gripped her from all around.

Oh! That's cool. We're connected. So everything I do to it, I'll do to myself.

Good thing I can take it, she thought with a smile.

Then she charged.

She dodged under the remnants of its jaw, slamming her fist into the monster's massive chest before she vanished, reappearing above it, her own chest caved inward slightly. She coughed up blood and sent her charged flames onto its back, feeling heat and death burn into her own skin.

A few seconds passed as she healed with her third-tier spell; the effects were considerably slower but still enough to deal with her injuries as she dodged the frenzied attacks of the creature. She laughed when she noticed its own injuries not healing.

She came down on it again with her charged fists, purposely not aiming for its head with any of her attacks as her physical hits slammed into its spine. After a few more strikes landed, she finally splintered its spine beneath the purple flames.

Ilea's hands were stripped of flesh, but her own spine refused to shatter as she continued her relentless strikes, landing dozens of hits before the monster slumped forward, unable to move its legs or wings anymore. She bathed in the flames, healing herself as she absorbed every shred of mana she could gather.

Finally, Ilea sat down on the monster's neck, her mantle reforming within the flames of death, her white fire spreading out and slowly engulfing the heavily injured enemy.

"What terrifying might!" Death said, slapping to the ground after it managed to free itself from the wall. It slowly floated up to eye level before it spoke once more. "Now finish it, wanderer. Destroy that which failed before you and claim victory!"

Failed before me?

"I'm burning it down," she said, healing herself against the damage still being transferred across to her. Flame of Creation pushed against the purple fires, slowly weakening the creature.

It was barely alive at this point, but its pure magical might was still above hers, which made the undeath struggle a prolonged conflict. Ilea just

wanted to focus on her third Class to get as much experience out of the battle as possible.

"Why do you put creatures that invade your dungeon through this?"

The Lich Fragment had crossed its arms, blue light flickering in its eyes. "Invaders must be fought and killed. Would you not say that is the nature of things?"

"But you said you're testing my strength?"

The being didn't share more with her.

Ilea cut into the creature with her ashen limbs and spears to speed up the process until a series of dings finally rang within her mind.

"How long have you been down here?" Ilea asked.

"How long?" Death asked, its tone mocking, before its glowering eyes seemed to look into the distance. "How long?" it whispered to itself, seemingly oblivious to her.

'ding' You have defeated [Winged Death of the North – lvl 1008]

'ding' The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 504 – 5 stat points awarded
'ding' The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 501 – 5 stat points awarded
'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 467 – 1 stat point awarded
'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 468 – 1 stat point awarded

'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6
'ding' Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4

'ding' Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5

'ding' Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 13
'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 19

'ding' You have effortlessly slaughtered a four-mark creature – 1 Core Skill point awarded

Effortlessly, eh? We're at that point now.

The Lich led Ilea onward into a broad corridor of ice, various enchantments now instantly noticeable to her. *A bunch of traps,* she thought, not spotting any creatures or signs of anyone having ever set foot in the area.

“What am I supposed to do here, just walk through?” she asked, already walking.

“Indeed,” Death said, sounding both more focused and more excited now that she had slain the Wyvern.

She felt a few of the enchantments activate, and mists of cold air hissed out as the ice all around her cracked, leaving frozen patches on her mantle. Ilea quickly discarded the damaged parts, healing her defenses as more spells activated around her.

Her eyebrows quirked up as she noticed a familiar sensation from one of the explosions. She decided not to dodge it, instead analyzing the soul magic that flowed through her.

A Lich. Should’ve expected as much.

Ilea looked inward to see her essence slightly damaged. The pain was still there, an instinctual wrongness she’d likely never be able to shake. Her training with Seithir helped her deal with it, for while the feeling was wrong, it was at least familiar.

She couldn’t heal the damage with her magic, but it would recover in time. Maybe she could also get a few more levels to her resistance before she had to face the Lich Fragment, if it came to that. She felt more intrigued than ever as to what exactly this was all about.

Ilea side-eyed the floating humanoid being as she kept walking through the increasingly chaotic field of magical explosions. She made sure to leave no enchantment dormant, occasionally even sending an ashen limb into the ice to activate any that she missed.

When she arrived at the other end of the corridor, she had a slightly damaged soul, coupled with a bit of mana yet to be recovered due to continually healing and reforming her mantle. None of the spells had managed to get through her defenses entirely, besides the soul magic.

‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14

She could tell the Lich Fragment’s enchantments were of a different quality than Seithir’s spells, but she lacked the understanding to differentiate the specifics. The enchantments had felt more chaotic, but given their explosive application, that seemed obvious.

“I did it,” she said in a monotone, turning around to face the being.

“Indeed. Splendid defenses you possess, wanderer. But I suppose it was a little underwhelming after your fight with the Winged Death. This hallway leads to the next battle on the Path of Death. All wanderers from all paths are required to go through it.”

Probably where most of them die, Ilea thought, remembering her first encounter with soul magic. She was glad it hadn’t been here.

What followed were eighteen battle halls with all kinds of dangerous undead monsters and humanoids taken from the northern regions, all interlinked by trap-laden hallways. None of them were as high-leveled as the four-mark at the start, but they became increasingly dangerous and numerous.

Ilea was mostly just surprised by how many creatures the Lich Fragments had captured here, making sure with each kill that there wasn’t enough physical matter left connected for them to raise the creatures once more. She actually had no idea how much of an undead was truly required to raise them again. Perhaps just the soul was enough and mana would fill in the rest. She hoped not.

Could’ve learned more about that from Maro.

Most of the creatures had only a few abilities, and not many had answers against her healing or space magic. None had anything against both. All of them were overwhelmed by her mana intrusion at one point or another. Some monsters she had to avoid, getting in hits with well-timed teleportation while recovering both mana and health between strikes, others she could simply approach and punch until they were nothing but a lifeless pulp of bones and flesh.

“You have been most impressive, wanderer,” Death said when she finished the last level nine hundred Wyrmling, its head snapping to the side when she finally managed to overwhelm its continued regeneration.

Ilea had lost a good chunk of her mana in that fight, but her wounds healed as she looked over at the Lich Fragment, quickly checking her messages to see how far she had come.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Undead Hallowed Beetle – lvl 628]

…

‘ding’ You have defeated [Undead Glacial Wyrmling – lvl 913]

‘ding’ The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 502 – 5 stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 469 – 1 stat point awarded
‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 470 – 1 stat point awarded – 1 Core Skill point awarded
…
‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 476 – 1 stat point awarded

‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6
‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5
‘ding’ Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3

‘ding’ Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 30

‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 7
‘ding’ Blight Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2
‘ding’ Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18
‘ding’ Crystal Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15
‘ding’ Dark Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7
‘ding’ Flesh Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10
‘ding’ Flesh Magic Resistance reaches lvl 11
‘ding’ Shadow Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2
‘ding’ Shadow Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3
‘ding’ Shadow Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4
‘ding’ Smoke Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4

“You had quite the collection here. Care to raise them all again for another round?” Ilea asked with a smile. Checking her marks next, she saw that while Feyrair had moved quite a distance through the underground, the two Elders remained in the very same place they had been in some hours prior.

Whatever this is leading to, it’s great for my levels, she thought, especially glad that Space Shift had finally reached the last level in the third tier. The fact that the Lich Fragment had so many creatures in its employ, either willingly or not, meant she could try herself against a wide variety of unknowns.

None had used magic entirely unfamiliar to her, or at least to her resistances, which made the whole process a lot smoother than it could’ve

been. And it made her feel some satisfaction. Even for a gauntlet like this, she was well prepared.

“You have proven your capabilities, wanderer. There is no need to redo what you have already accomplished,” Death said with a vibrating whisper as the ground before them opened up to reveal a deep shaft of ice and stone farther down. “But now awaits your most dire task. A monster so gruesome that none has slain it in all the time the paths have existed.”

Ilea noted that they were now quite far below the others. “You can’t summon the creature in this area here?” she asked, using Eternal Huntress to see if she could see signs of a dangerous creature. The very air coming from the darkness below seemed to light up in her perception.

“The last battlefield is down below,” Death said.

Oh really?

“You’re not coming down with me?”

“It is your trial, wanderer. Prove yourself, and perhaps I shall grant your freedom.”

“Aha.”

Her magic-infused instincts informed her that whatever was waiting down below was considerably more dangerous than the creature hovering in front of her. Still, she didn’t think it a pushover either, mostly due to the soul magic it wielded.

“And what’s stopping me from just attacking you here and ending the Path of Death?”

Death’s eyes glowered as it spread its arms and smiled deviously. “Not a mere brute, this invader? I did not wish to threaten you like this, but you leave me no choice. Your… allies, friends, whatever they may be to you – I will hunt them down and kill them while you fail to navigate these corridors to try and stop me. You may possess strength, but this is not your home, and I believe your allies are not quite as durable, or am I wrong?”

The mask is off. Well, it did call this the Path of Death.

A threat, then.

“You overestimate your spatial abilities,” Ilea said, pretty sure she could just latch on to his teleportation.

“You wished for a challenge, wanderer. Here is your challenge. Go into the cavern, slay the monster, and be on your way, with your allies unharmed.” It floated a little closer. “Are you not interested in the being that has kept even me at bay?”

Concentrated bursts of soul magic could take the Elders out. Probably. They're tough, but this thing is a four-mark, though it doesn't feel like a particularly strong one to me, or a good fighter. And I'll have to consider the other two fragments, too. Would we have to face all of them together?

Doesn't seem like a good idea either way. So it's a choice between two fights.

"I'm interested in good fights, sure, but I don't like being threatened into them."

The fragment moved both hands to its head and bent over, producing a maddening screech. "It's been so long! And we must gain power, we must! Or everything is… everything is…" It shouted, pointing at her, "You are one who can succeed where all others have failed! Regeneration, a mind to think, instincts honed in countless battles. You would jump down to face the monster. I know it to be true. You want power? You want challenge, no? What else could you want?"

Ilea was taken aback by its sudden desperation.

"If I… present… the essence of those you hold dear… to be kept here forever, or released… I will have to kill them," he murmured, floating away.

Ilea prevented his teleport, causing him to look back with anger.

"Let them go now, and I promise that I will try to fight whatever's down there. If I fail, I'll come back when I'm stronger."

"You would have me abandon everything for the mere promise of an invader?" Death asked, eyes flickering.

"You said you knew my kind. Either you accept and get a chance at me fighting that thing, or I will kill you right here. And trust me, if you harm any of my allies, I will carve out this entire mountain to find and destroy everything that is a part of you."

As their eyes locked, the Lich Fragment considered the proposition for a moment. Then it made a strange sound and narrowed its wisp-like eyes. "Very well, wanderer. I accept."

It moved them both into the room the Elders still occupied.

"…and thus, we were betrayed, and forevermore I grieve and long for her, and everyone… everyone whose faces…" the fragment said in a whisper, tears of blue light rolling down its ethereal form.

Ilea heard the fragment next to her grinding its teeth as she looked at Pierce, who was listening with obvious interest. Verena seemed relieved to

see her, then glanced at the other fragment.

“These two will be released,” Death said.

“Then has she won. May the ritual begin?” the second fragment asked with hope, glancing at Ilea and then at Death, though it received no response. “Very well, I shall see them off,” it said, vanishing with the Elders in tow.

Another ritual. I’m getting a bad feeling about all this.

But I’m also interested in fighting some dangerous beast.

Ilea saw the Elders appear far above her before she latched onto the fragment that called itself Death again. They arrived in a long hall filled with burning rocks, wooden bars and poles, ice splinters on the ground, and angled walls. An obstacle course, she surmised.

Feyrair was dangling from one of the walls, trying to reach a nearby crevice before he jumped and grabbed hold of it, giving off a joyous hiss.

The nearby fragment jumped in the air. “Yes! You did it! Well done, elf!”

“I know. I’m the best.”

A story about betrayal, and now this? What’s even happening here? Ilea thought, glancing at the now even more annoyed fragment next to her.

“He is free to go, take him out,” Death said in a commanding tone.

The other fragment glanced over. “That is… unexpected. Has she succeeded?” it asked, though its voice didn’t sound quite as hopeful as the storyteller’s. It gave Ilea a long look, then vanished, taking Feyrair with it.

So Death commands the others. And whatever monster I will fight, its defeat is somehow important for a ritual.

“Why go to all this trouble?” Ilea asked when they were back in front of the hole.

“You do not need to know,” Death said. “Now go and slay the beast.”

“Care to give me some more information about it? If you want it dead, I might benefit from some clues.”

It thought for a moment. “The beast is at a higher level than I. It uses void magic, and though it is mindless, its instincts and ability to adapt are above what most monsters display. The area will be dark to your eyes, but the creature can see.”

“Alright. Now you’d better not go back on the deal. I’ll check it out, and if I can’t win, you’ll help me train.”

“That was not part of the agreement.”

“Well. It seems like you want that thing dead, right?” she asked with a smile.

Death didn’t reply. Its eyes merely glowered while it ground its invisible teeth.

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FORTY

Void

Ilea put her newest stat points into Vitality to get a little bit more of an edge against whatever was waiting for her down in the dark cavern below. She checked the locator and found that it was pointing in the same direction.

Nice. Well, let's hope the fragment doesn't want the same thing.

She tried not to overthink it. As it stood, she expected to be fighting the Lich Fragment either way. Mainly because it had threatened to kill her friends instead of just asking her for help. It either believed itself invincible against her or was simply too focused on whatever it wanted from the death of the void creature. A creature it couldn't slay on its own, a level one thousand sapient Lich Fragment. That meant it had magical power, sure, but it wasn't on a par with most of the four-mark beings she'd faced before.

"Will you go, then?" the fragment asked in a strained voice.

Ilea spread her wings and layered her mantle as she gathered heat within her chest.

Maybe I can even ally myself with whatever's down there.

Then she jumped.

Her wings made her float down slowly, her dominion spreading out again below as she left the influence of the icy walls of the City of Glass dungeon. The environment turned to stone at the bottom of the shaft, more jagged and natural than what the liches had surely created or altered. Her enhanced eyes let her see even in the complete darkness of the cave.

Ilea noted the lack of space in the area. Several small crevices led deeper into the stone, with dozens more spreading out like the roots of a tree. She saw the odd stone sphere missing in the area, easily explained by the mention of void magic.

She couldn't see a creature waiting for her, so she used her locator to find the key. It was the only reason they had come here, after all, and now that her companions seemed to be safe, she could do pretty much whatever she wanted. Ilea planned to fight the monster either way, whether that be now or whenever she was ready. If only to fuck with whatever the lich was looking for or planning to do.

She listened for anything in the vicinity, checking with Eternal Huntress to see if she could find any trace of a powerful being.

She did.

Very informative, she thought as her skill let her know that a creature beyond her level had once been somewhere within these caverns. She smiled to herself, wondering if that part of the skill would ever truly be useful. Pretty much everywhere she went these days had monsters that outmatched her in pure magical prowess.

She went deeper, mostly using her teleportation. She didn't exactly want to brute-force her way through with her ash. Everything seemed somewhat unstable. Nor did the skeletons of various creatures stuck between chunks of stone instill a lot of confidence in the den's structural integrity.

Gods, I would've slapped myself back on Earth if I ever even considered going spelunking. Let alone without a lamp, rope, a radio, and a team to get me out if something happens.

Ilea just hoped it wasn't full of water, but so far, that didn't seem to be the case. The temperature, even so deep within the earth, was still incredibly cold. Her dominion skill made any feelings of claustrophobia entirely irrelevant. Coupled with her teleportation and sheer physical might, there was always a way to get out.

Unlike when I'm in deep water, even though I can technically teleport through that too… She shuddered as the eye of the Leviathan came to her mind. *Aftershock mind attack.*

She banged her head with surprise when she found a single eye staring back at her from the darkness.

Not the Leviathan's but that of a mostly humanoid creature clinging to a wall deeper in the cavern. It had a single head with a single eye, its body

was thin and elongated, and its rib cage was open, revealing a gaping maw that stretched along most of its torso. Four thin, bony, three-jointed limbs with long, clawed fingers kept it clamped against the wall as it looked her way, waiting.

Ilea couldn't shake the instant familiarity. The being was uncannily like the Soul Rippers from Tremor. Its spine pushed up through its skin, barely ten kilos of meat on the two-meter-long creature, and most of it was arms and legs.

Can it see through the stone?

The creature was still a few dozen meters away from her, so she attempted to find a diplomatic solution.

"Hello," she sent.

The creature didn't react, remaining where it was without making the slightest move.

Not a communicative fellow, then, she thought, checking her locator to find the key deeper still. She teleported once more, and though the pupil of the being followed her, its body remained in the same position.

Yeah, that's very Soul Rippery. Did you get summoned here by the Ascended, too?

Next, she used Monster Hunter. But again, the thing remained motionless.

Don't mind me, then.

Ilea teleported below and past it, going for the key. As soon as she had passed the creature, it moved, its arms quickly pushing it across the wall with practiced motions. She couldn't help but feel a little creeped out, watching the thing approach through her dominion at a pace that seemed neither logical nor possible in these cramped and dark conditions.

When it was ten meters away, its eye started glowing within her dominion. She could detect several auras, one expanding past her and instantly eating away at her mantle at a concerning pace. Another one, closer to the being, seemed to have only a ten-meter radius.

She knew the latter would do something to her teleports, but compared to Audur's preventive aura, it seemed purely defensive. The being stopped when Ilea didn't move, remaining about seven meters and just as many nooks and crannies away from her.

Void, huh? she thought, watching her mantle in a constant battle of destruction and reformation. *Pretty impressive stuff.*

Ilea teleported up a few times to see if the creature would just defend its lair, but she found that it followed her now. Its destructive aura was similar to her own dominion, coupled with reverse reconstruction.

Well, let's see who has better recovery, Mr. Void, she thought, sending destructive mana toward it.

The creature didn't react at first, not even flinching at the reverse healing capable of destroying Taleen Guardians near instantly. Still, Ilea could feel the fabric around her changing, corrupted, as she watched the wisps float away, pushed rather than guided.

She was about to teleport when she saw the spherical field of magic around the core of whatever spell the being was casting. Something would happen if she passed through it with a skill, but she didn't yet know what. Deciding to avoid the ability in a more direct sense, she simply crossed her arms, added a few ashen spikes, and slammed into the stone.

Barely a moment passed between her first sensing the creature's spell and her armored body crashing through several sets of stone walls, everything behind her collapsing before it all vanished. The larger magical sphere had manifested in the fabric, closing in on the core and taking all the surrounding matter with it. A loud *thwump* could be heard as the nearby air filled the void, drawing stone toward it as well.

Ilea had mostly managed to avoid the area, her left wing healing from the much stronger effects of the concentrated spell. Her Eternal Sight hadn't activated, likely due to her third-tier Void Magic Resistance. She wouldn't vanish like the stone and air.

Ilea teleported next to the creature to finally get a read on it with her identification skills. *Thought as much*, she mused, appearing a few meters away from the being, just where its aura ended. *That's how it works. The space around it counts as matter, at least to my space magic. Can't teleport into it.*

Another void sphere formed where she stood, and Ilea risked its activation now that she had seen what it did. She teleported out, her spell interrupted when she passed through the field, all the void magic flashing toward the breach instead of the previous center. She didn't wait for it to reach her, instead using her second teleport to try again. This time, the field was gone, and she wasn't interrupted. That meant she had to use both her spells on one of the spheres to escape.

Where she reappeared, another sphere formed. Her first skill would likely be ready once the sphere closed, but she simply pushed forward. She wasn't quite able to break through the walls as well as on her first attempt, the void magic ripping everything around her into nothingness, a part of her mantle dissolving, and her flesh and bone below shaken by the flash of dense magic.

She coughed up blood, half her body destroyed by the spell but healing quickly. She hadn't lost any limbs or organs, but everything felt wrong; her third-tier healing was working hard to recover it all.

Before she could do anything else, the next sphere appeared, and then three more.

Ilea didn't hesitate, her mantle flowing into an ashen drill before she pushed forward again. Her healing restored her armor as she punched through the dense underground, breaking through walls and stone. She saw the spheres of void magic catch the falling debris and send it into nothingness.

That thing is going to destroy its entire lair.

By the time she circled around, she was back at full health. The creature still scrambled after her, ignoring the falling chunks of stone hitting its body as its eye flashed time and time again.

Ilea started adding sharp turns to her repertoire, noticing the creature placing spells ahead of her to catch her off guard. A few of its many spheres hit, leaving her defenses vulnerable and her body injured, but the main issue was that part of her drill dissolved.

Her body twitched as she slowed down, and four spheres hit her near instantly. She teleported out with both movement skills, appearing closer to the creature and in the tunnel of spheres it had created. She spat out a chunk of bloody flesh, healing her wounds as she got her first real glance at the creature running toward her on the ceiling of its own void tunnel.

[Void Lord – lvl ????]

Ilea estimated it to be around level one thousand one hundred, just a bit higher than the Lich Fragment that had sent her down here. She wasn't surprised that it hadn't been able to fight this creature on its own.

It dashed toward her, its arms whirling at impossible angles. Its skin was the same purplish color as the Soul Rippers, another indicator that they

might be from a similar realm or species. Its head had small thorns that grew out of it in what seemed like completely random patterns, but its main feature was its one eye that stared at Ilea no matter where she was. It was purple too.

A hunter of some kind, Ilea thought, flying through the tunnel and away from the being as she reformed her drill and mantle, tunneling into the stone as soon as its spheres appeared in front of her. *I'll make this whole mountain collapse if I have to…*

She summoned her beam cannon, aiming at the creature via her dominion before she sent a near-fully charged Embered Heart toward it. The spell burned through the stone walls as if they were paper, but when it reached the creature, the energy seemed to vanish, reappearing behind it and flashing outward in an uncontrolled manner. The redirected beam cut into the ceiling and walls, causing tons of rock to tumble and fall.

Ilea had to avoid another set of spheres as she kept flying, the echoing sounds of falling stone drowning out any other noise as dust and debris filled many of the crevices. She turned away from a near-solid rock formation, the lack of air pockets between them too much for her to keep up the same drilling speed.

Is there some kind of field around it that redirects magical attacks?

She started spreading ash behind her; most of it would dissolve from the continuous void magic, but she hoped some of it would remain. Ilea thought it too dangerous to approach the creature in its preferred terrain, not knowing what other tricks it had up its void sleeves. Luckily, it didn't seem particularly intelligent, happily helping her hollow out the mountain with its inexhaustible spells.

What's even the point of these creatures? Can't exactly eat what you void away.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she found herself caught again in an area too dense to drill through quickly. This time, she used a charged Archon Strike to shatter a large section of stone, reforming her drill as she entered the space and pushed forward.

Maybe it's after magic? But it doesn't seem like it's absorbing it…

Most of the debris was gone in the next moment, dematerialized by the Void Lord as it scuttled after her on all fours.

That's a terrifying sight, she thought as she watched it move in her dominion. As she tried to analyze the space around it with her Space

Awareness, she continued to send destructive mana into its body, though she wasn't sure if any of it actually reached it. She didn't use her full power, requiring much of her healing to keep herself alive.

But you're not quite a Leviathan, are you? she thought with a slight smile. *Just another powerful monster left behind in no man's land. And I'll gladly rid the world of you.*

When she sent a cloud of burning ash at the flying creature, it suddenly stopped before a sphere made most of it disappear.

Oh? We don't like that, do we?

She checked her resources, then started teleporting away, back to the entrance of the deep caverns. She was getting somewhat low on mana, and she wanted to see if it would follow her back to the frozen section, but the creature soon lost her due to its lack of teleportation.

Ilea burst out into the City of Glass dungeon to find an expectant Lich Fragment waiting for her. She didn't say anything as she landed, healing herself and recovering her mana. She looked down into the hole and waited.

"It's strong but pretty stupid too," she told Death, checking her messages.

'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7
'ding' Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7

'ding' Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5

'ding' Drill reaches lvl 4
…
'ding' Drill reaches lvl 8
'ding' Oxygen Repository reaches 2nd lvl 9

She hadn't even noticed the lack of air down there. It simply hadn't presented a more pressing issue than the falling tons of rock and the Void Lord hunting her.

'ding' Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 10
'ding' Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 11

Nice. Finding Nes and Scipio was cool, but I'm starting to like this place quite a bit, too.

"Can I lure it up here?" she asked.

"It won't come. I've tried," the fragment answered. "The noisy environment presents a challenge on its own. I'm sure you noticed."

"The more rock that falls onto that thing, the better. Why do you want it dead again?"

"It has something that belongs to me."

Oh? Didn't expect an answer.

"It didn't look like it was running around with a purse," she said.

"Deeper in its lair. Perhaps it considers it a treasure, or perhaps it is simply attracted to its dense magic."

Dense magic?

"I could just get whatever it is and bring it here."

The Lich considered it, then shook its head. "No. It's too dangerous. That creature needs to be gone."

Well, we agree on that, at least, she thought, summoning some food. It didn't provide any mana, but during and after battles like that one, she always got hungry, no matter the state of her magically enhanced body. Her mantle cleaned away all the dust and debris on her before she started eating.

"What are you waiting for?" the Lich asked.

"Strategic planning," she lied. "I need time to think."

In truth, there were a few things she had to figure out, and she certainly had to stall enough for her soul to heal. Every little bit would help, but she also enjoyed the growing annoyance emanating from the being in front of her.

It felt like her boss was giving her an annoying task on her last day. Not that her boss at the fast food place had been a dick, but she could imagine this Lich as some kind of difficult middle manager in the local dungeon company.

But you have no power here, old undead, she thought with a grin.

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FORTY-ONE

Absolutely Nothing

Ilea really, really took her time with her meal, only going back down the shaft long after her mana had topped off, her soul had recovered, and her palate had been satisfied. Death had remained with her during it all, either not trusting her enough to let her leave its sight or simply too impatient, now that someone *trapped* in its dungeon was finally capable of facing the Void Lord.

She would find out what it was that it so desired, but she was still a little confused why it didn't just teleport past the creature. Would it get caught and killed? She doubted it would be that easy; it was a four-mark too, Death and the Void Lord should've at least been at a similar power level.

The Lich definitely didn't strike her as an adventurer or fighter, more just someone who used their power to make others do their bidding, be it monsters it controlled or, well, people who stumbled into its dungeon.

Ilea jumped down into the dark once again, teleporting a few times until she was again beset by the void magic monster. This time, she simply moved past the creature, using her skills in tandem to make more distance. She summoned the locator occasionally, assuming the location of whatever treasure the creature was hiding to be the same place where she would find the key.

About ten seconds had passed since she had entered the cavern before she found a spherical area illuminated by various items glowing with magic in her dominion. She found a makeshift storage room stacked with shiny

stones, crystals, and various other trinkets, mostly notable for their color alone.

So the creature collected this stuff and hoarded it here?

She instantly found the key among the other treasures, its design prominent among the mostly natural ores. Ilea stored it and started identifying the rest, keeping an eye out for the creature that was still on the hunt for her.

[Silver Ore – High Quality] – [Metal]
[Crystal – Common Quality] – [Not Metal]
[Lich Phylactery Fragment – Timeless Quality] – [Enchanted / Fractured]

"Hmm, I guess the Lich wasn't looking for some silver ore," Ilea murmured, looking at the enchanted sphere, glowing faintly blue. There were three of them in total, and she was pretty sure that this was what Death was looking for.

It would've been easy. If the Lich had just asked her to go and get them, she would've likely helped. Especially if it had also offered all those monsters for her to fight. But now, things looked different.

She grabbed the other two as well, hidden among the likely less valuable ores.

Three phylactery fragments… for three Lich Fragments and some kind of ritual. If only I knew a necromancer or three to figure out what they've got planned.

But first, I've got a monster to kill.

Ilea teleported away when she saw the Void Lord approach, their battle continuing as she lured it toward the section it had already started clearing out. She wanted to try and figure out the field it produced in its immediate vicinity, but thought it too dangerous to do so in a confined space, especially with the teleportation traps it set with its spheres. She needed an actual cave, not this field of nooks and crannies.

She decided to use the monster's magic in tandem with her own. It took the two of them about half an hour to hollow out a large enough section of the underground for Ilea to confidently engage the monster in battle. As the area became larger, she found it easier to dodge the spells with her wings and occasional teleports, but the damage was still massive.

The experience was similar to her previous four-mark encounters and other battles of attrition against monsters far beyond her magical prowess but neither smart enough nor equipped with the right tools to pin her down. Ilea checked the few messages she had gotten since she had come back down into the cavern.

‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 8
‘ding’ Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 8

‘ding’ Drill reaches lvl 9
…
‘ding’ Drill reaches lvl 12
‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches 2nd lvl 10
‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 12
…
‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 14

Ilea grinned at the additions, glad to be out there and facing real danger again. She was surprised that her continued efforts hadn’t rewarded her with any levels in Veteran or Deviant, but she supposed the experience simply wasn’t extraordinary enough to qualify for any level-ups. The Void Lord wasn’t the first eldritch creature she had fought in complete darkness, and it surely wouldn’t be the last.

Ilea sacrificed about fifteen thousand points of health into her flames and aura as she charged at the creature, avoiding its void magic on her approach. Her ash fanned out, the white flames lighting up the now-vast cavern, pockmarked with perfect spheres, latching onto an invisible field of magic around the one-eyed monster.

A flash of void magic fanned out in a sphere around it, getting rid of the flames before more came in again.

Ilea sent low charges of her fire beams at the dodging monster, the energy vanishing whenever it reached the being. She watched the space around the creature as the spells reappeared in random locations in a radius around its body. None actually reached it, and she came to the conclusion that none ever would, not if she attacked in this way.

Ilea had an inkling that her next idea wouldn’t work either, but she had to try. She rushed the being and tried to punch it, wrestling with a magical

force before her spell connected with something. Stone exploded a few meters away from her.

That figures, she thought. She had seen her fist connect with the Void Lord's body, but the result was the same. A series of void blasts pushed her back, her mantle whittled away more with each blow before she managed to heal it back up again, flying wide in the artificial cavern to make sure the being couldn't hit her easily.

Ilea continued to observe the space around the creature as she started to experiment with heat-charged ashen spears. First, she simply sent them at the creature and watched them reappear, then she used her own spatial manipulation skill to displace them to a different location before they entered the field or once they reappeared.

After several dozen attempts, she got a hit. The Void Lord was sent stumbling to the side, an explosion of heat and fire engulfing its side. Ash and white flames clung to its skin as more burning spears came flying through the darkness, accompanied by Ilea's laughter.

Slowly, she unraveled the defensive field but found the creature could manipulate it rather well, her attempts remaining somewhat random with the occasional hit. She charged up her core, only using negligible energy within the spears to continue to annoy the being as she dodged its own void magic while enduring its constantly damaging sphere.

There it is, she thought with a grin, seeing a shift in the fabric, right above the creature. She watched one of her burning spears vanish. Ilea aimed her rifle about two meters away and above the fast-moving creature, a chaotic stream of heat and energy burning into the Wyrm's eye before a beam of concentrated heat slashed into thin air.

She watched the beam vanish just before it would've hit the ground, and then the monster was set alight as a glowing, fiery line showed up on its body. For the first time, it opened the mouth on its chest, several tentacle-like extensions moving within as it screeched in a low-pitched tone.

"Didn't like that, did you?" Ilea said, charging up her next beam. She kept an eye on the glowing injury, noticing the scorched skin didn't heal immediately.

Wonderful, she thought, just as an incredible burst of mana spread out, the being at its center.

Ilea didn't notice the change with her precognition; the same teleportation trap kept her in place instead of risking an early activation of

whatever this was. All the sound vanished as soon as the sphere engulfed her, and her dominion couldn't perceive a single thing either. Not the ground, the ceiling, nor the creature itself. The remnants of her fires were gone, and no source of light remained as she felt an oppressing force of void magic burning into her defenses from all around.

Flare of Creation fought back as she healed her mantle, staying calm despite her rapidly declining defenses. She would be overwhelmed in time, but Ilea had experienced a literal mini-sun burning her alive. This was manageable.

Nothing in my dominion, light doesn't travel, enhanced eyes can't see anything, she thought, floating through the dark space on her wings. *No air. No gravity?*

It all felt wrong, the fabric itself entirely different from anything she had seen before. And yet there were still wisps here. Displacement and Transfer both worked, but she always reappeared in the same darkness, her defenses still being burned. She was down to the last layer of her mantle now, and more was already dissolving even as her third-tier healing reformed layer after layer, the surrounding magic simply too much for her to handle alone.

'ding' Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 15

She still had her lifeline of a third-tier Transfer, but with the trap still in place, she didn't know if it would work or if she wanted to risk it, given the activation time. The only thing she could perceive was the wisps.

I solved the Meadow's puzzles and escaped from a dragon, she thought. *I'm not going to run from an underground void creature.*

Ilea used her dominion to map out everything in the area, sending spears of ash flying and moving her wings and ashen limbs to see how everything behaved, studying whether the projectiles flew in a straight line or disappeared.

She felt her ashen spears move through the darkness, following their zigzagging movements with her eyes. Next, she formed spheres, sending them all around the space as she teleported from one to the next, moving them out and back, finding dozens of void magic fields that simply led from one to another. Just as she was beginning to figure out the layout, her skin started to dissolve.

If my brain fails, I'm fucked.

Ilea kept teleporting her body through the expanding field of ashen spheres until she had figured out that she was in a spherical area far larger than what the creature had created in normal space. She had a theory that Phaseshift could bring her out if she timed it correctly and reached the border, but where was the fun in that?

Instead, she focused her whole mind on finding the center of it all. That was how the spell worked, she knew – and at the center of it all, if her understanding was right, she would find the Void Lord, controlling everything in the area around it.

She didn't quite know how the void interacted with the fabric of space to create this field, but she had some strong intuitions. Based on all her perceptions and all her experience with the Fae and the Meadow, she had an inkling that while this spell was active, the defense that the Void Lord used could not exist. Not simultaneously.

Time to find out.

Her hair was gone and her muscles were burning away when she appeared in the center of it all. The mesh here was complex, but the being wasn't the only one with a few space tricks at the ready. Ilea added her third-tier Displacement gate to the mix, positioning it between the mesh and her target.

She moved through it and slammed her fist down, a fully charged Archon Strike coupled with her Tempered Seal and a spherical blast of her Embered Heart flashing out for a split second. Her fist impacted something.

I knew it!

A pained screech rent the air as the darkness fell apart around them, void-like nothingness replaced by stone. As the floor and cavern reappeared in a multitude of angles, directions, and distances, much of it falling apart, she noticed deep cuts appearing on her whole body, too. She moved her head to avoid a split in her skull, only receiving a deep gash in her neck instead.

The oppressive mana had disappeared by the time she slapped to the ground, landing on one knee, her whole body skinned and reduced to half its muscle mass. Her third-tier healing quickly worked to overwhelm the creature's remaining damage field as her mantle formed above bleeding flesh and skin. She was already reforming her face as the dozens of cuts closed.

She found the creature reeling on the ground, hands clutching its face, with burns all over its form. Ilea vanished, finding the defensive field disrupted. “Welcome back to reality,” she said. Then her fists came down in a whirl of white flames and fiery blue flashes as her mana intrusion penetrated its thick skin.

Its claws and mouth scraped uselessly against her ash mantle, her punches only growing in power and frequency as she simply ignored the void spells it sent out time and time again. The battle had been going on for long enough that its damage had halved, and she knew how much power each of its spells held by now.

More to the point, she knew when a monster was desperate. And so she persisted, her ashen limbs pinning the creature down and her to it, explosions echoing through the cavern until she had dumped most of her mana into the being and a ding resounded in her mind.

She jumped back and waited, watching as she recovered her mana and listened for any sign of the Lich Fragment coming down or the Void Lord getting back up again. Neither happened.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Void Lord – lvl 1103]

‘ding’ The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 505 – 5 stat points awarded
…
‘ding’ The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 507 – 5 stat points awarded
‘ding’ The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 503 – 5 stat points awarded
…
‘ding’ The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 505 – 5 stat points awarded
‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 477 – 1 stat point awarded
…
‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 486 – 1 stat point awarded

‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6
‘ding’ Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5
‘ding’ Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6
‘ding’ Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7
‘ding’ Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 20
‘ding’ Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 16
‘ding’ Spear of Ash reaches lvl 16
‘ding’ Spear of Ash reaches lvl 17
‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 27

More levels, baby. I’m about to become the ultimate Veteran.

She stood silently in the dark as she healed and regained her mana. It would take some time, but she assumed Death wouldn’t come down here immediately. Not with how scared it had been before.

‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 16

She put her forty new stat points into Wisdom and checked the last message.

‘ding’ You have survived the Maze of Emptiness spell – 1 Core Skill point awarded

I did, she thought, proud of the achievement. For once, it wasn’t just her resilience alone that had allowed her to survive a four-mark’s special ability but her knowledge of space magic, the fabric, and her skill in maneuvering through it all. She stored the creature’s corpse, thinking that the Meadow, the Fae, or her new contacts in the north might be interested in the remains.

She summoned the key she had found earlier and identified it, noticing a slight blue sheen on its heavily enchanted and reinforced surface.

[The Cobalt Key – Ancient Quality] – [Enchanted]

Another one down, which makes six.

Ilea could already get more out of the One without Form with the keys she had found thus far, as long as it hadn’t lied to her about needing three keys for that, but she assumed more couldn’t hurt.

Either way, I want all twelve of them. And then, I’ll get myself a little sun.

She summoned a meal as she did after every good battle and set a fire with a bit of wood she had in her necklace. She sat down in an ashen armchair and watched the flames flicker in the dark cavern, her mana steadily recovering as she waited for the Lich to come down or for her resources to top off.

Gazing around her, she thought it looked like someone had come through with a pair of giant ice-cream scoops, cutting chunks of stone out of the ceiling and floor. The spherical incisions gave the place an outright alien feel, especially knowing that she was below a frozen dungeon and the mountains of the north.

Maybe I should check to see if there are any runes similar to the ones near Tremor.

Ilea enjoyed her meal to the last bite before she smothered the flames with some ash and stored the parts of the wood that were still good. A few uses of teleportation took her deep into the mountain, where the crevices gave way to solid rock after a few hundred meters, but the quick search didn't produce any results.

"Guess I should find out how the Lich is doing," she murmured, checking her marks. Death had kept its word. Her team was still waiting far above her, outside the dungeon.

I can't contact Verena again. Hmm. Should be fine.

Instead, she sent a message to Feyrair.

"Found key. Confronting Lich. Come if you've High Soul Resistance."

With that, she teleported back toward the entrance. She reappeared in the same hall, where the floating being was waiting for her, its arms folded. The other two Lich Fragments were now present as well.

"Did you succeed?" Death asked.

Ilea smiled. "Killed it," she said, giving them two thumbs-up and a wink.

"Do you have proof?"

She dropped the corpse for a second, then put it back into her necklace. "That enough for you?"

The Lich's eyes gleamed before he flew past her and into the hole with surprising speed. "Finally! Soon, we can continue!"

"So, did I just doom the world?" Ilea asked the other two. The slumped one looked relieved, while the other one seemed to sigh.

He's gonna be mad in a few minutes.

She glanced at the other two.
Now, what do we do here?

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FORTY-TWO

Rebirth

“I do not think you have doomed the world, no,” the first Lich Fragment said in its tired, high-pitched voice. “But I do suggest you leave this place before the ritual concludes.”

The other fragment looked over, its eyes glowing. “She helped us. She would not be in danger. And you should be elated… This will change… everything,”

“Will it, Pain?”

“What do you mean, Owl? Of course… this is what we have been working toward all this time, is it not?”

The question didn’t sound rhetorical but genuine, as if it had forgotten.

Owl and Pain?

“Maybe. I just have an inkling… a faint… feeling. Or is it intuition? It’s almost like…” Owl said. It seemed lost in thought for a moment.

“What will the ritual do?” Ilea asked.

“Death will combine the phylacteries, and we will merge into one, with him at the helm, as was always planned. And then… and then…” Pain said. “We will finally…”

“Finally what?” Owl asked.

“Do neither of you remember the purpose of what you’re doing here?” Ilea asked, now genuinely curious.

Does Death remember?

“Our purpose is to gain… power… and to protect… protect what?” Pain asked.

Owl glanced at the other Lich Fragment but didn’t speak.

“So Death will combine the fragments, and you’ll all merge?” Ilea asked. “But Death will be the one to remain? And I assume he’ll be more powerful.”

“That is how it shall be,” Pain said.

“And you two are fine with that? He would undo you, or am I missing something?”

“It is necessary. We knew… we knew what the plan was, didn’t we?”

“What about you, Owl?” Ilea asked.

Owl just looked at her. It didn’t say anything, but it felt to Ilea that the Lich Fragment knew more than it was sharing.

“I’ll be honest, you two. I can’t let this ritual happen. Death threatened me and my allies. He doesn’t deserve more power, so I don’t plan on leaving here without a fight.”

“No… you can’t!” Pain said, reaching out to her before it recoiled again in fear.

Owl cocked its head slightly. “You would face Death?”

“I’m an ash mage, Owl. I have faced death many times before, and it’s a lot more terrifying than some four-mark purple cloud with a bit of soul magic.”

“It won’t matter, you will not reach him, nor us. Once he has the phylacteries, this whole sham is over,” Pain said.

Ilea smiled.

“You have them, do you not?” Owl asked and paused, glancing toward the hole in the ground.

“You took them? Oh no…” Pain said, shivering in terror. “Death will not be pleased.”

“That’s kind of the point,” Ilea said.

“You risk much, wanderer. Why?” Owl asked.

“I told you. Because he threatened to kill my allies,” she answered. “So, you’re both intent on this ritual?”

“We are,” Pain said.

Owl didn’t answer.

“You’re not sure, Owl?” Ilea asked.

Pain looked at Owl with obvious confusion and fear. “What are you… This is all we wanted! You agreed as well. It is *necessary*!”

Owl twitched at the loud word. “Is it? It’s just…” It touched its head.

“Is there no other way?” Ilea asked. “Can I not just kill Death, and then you two will be free of all this?”

“No. We are bound to the phylacteries,” Owl said.

“And if I destroy his?”

“There is no ‘his’. All three are us.”

Ilea breathed in. “Hmm. You said the ritual would fuse you and that Death would remain, but more powerful. Can it not be one of you instead? ’Cause if anyone should gain power, it’s not him. If one of you ascends, that would get rid of him, no?”

“The other one would perish, too. Whichever of us does not ascend.” Owl looked over at Pain.

“It is my… purpose… but to go against Death…” Pain said.

“He’s an asshole who threatened me and my allies,” Ilea said.

It seemed to consider her words, floating back and forth. “That may be so… Perhaps you are right, wanderer. But if not Death…” Pain looked at them with confusion, then seemed to focus. “Then it must be you, Owl!”

Owl looked at the other fragment and drooped its shoulders slightly. “Why?” it asked, its voice cracking.

Is it… crying?

Owl seemed confused about that too, looking at the ethereal tears flowing down its face. “Pain… after everything… I only wanted to… I only wanted to…”

Pain floated over and rested its hands on Owl’s shoulders. “I no longer have the strength to fight… You know this, Owl. I came here… to die. But you are so young… so brave. It was supposed to have been Death, but perhaps this wanderer is right… Perhaps he is too far lost in his anger and vengeance.”

“But you would… you would perish,” Owl said.

Ilea noticed that Pain had straightened its posture. It seemed calmer than before.

“Yes,” Pain said. “And you, dear Owl, you will go on. More powerful than we could ever have dreamed.”

“So, can you start this ritual?” Ilea asked.

“He will not allow it,” Owl said.

“You will have to defeat his current form,” Pain said. “It will give us enough time to finish the ritual before he reforms.”

“You would share this?” Owl asked.

“Power is power, and Owl, your heart is true. I see it now,” Pain said. “I was scared. I thought Death was the only way forward. But perhaps with this wanderer, there really is another way. I will help in your battle.”

“And there’s no way to save you both?” Ilea asked.

“There is not. Nor is there a need,” Pain said, power exploding from its form. “I shall assist you with all I can. And so should you, Owl. To survive, and to protect, you will have to struggle, to fight. If you wish to claim this, you must now show your resolve.”

The Lich looked at Pain, its head drooping before it glanced at Ilea. It seemed unsure for a moment, then sighed. “I see… Then let us… let us finish this.”

“Just do whatever you can do to support and protect us,” Ilea said. “You’re the highest-level one here, after all,” she added, seeing Feyrair’s mark progressing through the dungeon. “And we have another ally coming our way.”

Pain looked up and vanished, returning a moment later with Feyrair in tow, the elf clad in white flames as he hissed at the two fragments. He turned to Ilea with a questioning look.

“These two will fight by our side. We need to kill the third one.”

“Finally,” Feyrair said. “A fight.”

They heard a wail echo up from deep below them, Death’s anger and frustration near palpable.

“Here he comes,” Ilea said as she started sacrificing health into her fire and auras. “Let’s beat the death out of him.”

Death appeared before them, soul and, of course, death magic emanating from its form as it looked at the gathered fighters and Lich Fragments, fields of magic stopping its aura as it spread its arms.

“You would betray me? After everything?” It sounded hurt at first, lost, but then anger took over. “Fools! So be it. I will kill these—”

Ilea appeared before it, her burning ash surging forward as she punched his chest with a charged set of spells. She ignored its pained wail and continued her assault, preventing its teleports as she tried to grapple its form with her ashen limbs.

Six more punches landed before she jumped off, displacing herself to avoid the incoming flare of soul magic. As she landed, Feyrair, now in his dragon form, joined her, while Pain formed sets of barriers that hovered close to its two new allies.

"Y… you… *beast!*" the Lich screeched, floating backward as a dozen creatures formed from thin air, summoned at his will. "You have no aut—"

Ilea held up her arm, sacrificing ten thousand health to form a fully charged cone of heat and energy in front of her. The blast incinerated everything the Lich had summoned, engulfing his screeching form, the barriers he tried to summon in the middle of it all shattering instantly.

The two warriors didn't hesitate. Feyrair pounced forward with the spell still pummeling the Lich, his resilient body taking the heat in stride, white burning claws slashing at the floating form two long strides later.

Ilea flew behind the Lich, once more preventing it from teleporting. Its shields were shattered by beams of death magic from the other Liches, making way for her arcane explosions and Flame of Creation. Ilea and Feyrair avoided each other's spells with practiced ease.

"Why must y—" the Lich cried, its words ceasing as arcane energy flowed through it. It tried summoning more creatures, but both it and its creations were burned by Feyrair's fire breath and more death magic from the others.

Ilea avoided the soul magic spells, while Feyrair seemed to just ignore them. She assumed his extended time with Seithir had something to do with that. The area spells she couldn't avoid were absorbed by the frequently appearing barriers of death magic.

I should've leveled that resistance more, she thought, giving the two liches floating behind them a slight nod.

She aimed her cannon at the Lich's chest and sent her charged beam forward, snapping the barrel upward to cut through its head as well. The death magic it sent in return was stopped by several sets of barriers.

The being couldn't utter another word amid the bombardment of continuous spells, her teleport prevention coupled with Feyrair's claws keeping it where it was. She had instinctively known that Death wasn't as dangerous as the other four-marks she had faced. And now she had the proof. Ilea was pretty sure she could've taken it down herself. The only caveat was its soul magic.

When the dragonling finally managed to grapple and push the ethereal form down with his flame-covered claws, the fight was over. His breath came out in a continuous stream, while Ilea increased her weight to send beam after beam of concentrated heat and energy into the downed form, the frozen ground below shattering and melting.

They didn't let up until a noise filled her mind.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Lich Fragment – lvl 1038]

'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 487 – 1 stat point awarded

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 21
'ding' Monstrous reaches lvl 4
'ding' Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 28

"All that arrogance, and then this is all he had," she sighed. "No wonder he needed someone else to kill that beast."

Feyrair turned back into his elven form, the ground around him cracked and still on fire. He went into a crouch and hissed before he fell on his ass. "That was beyond anything Seithir could conjure up," he said in a tired voice.

"We could've taken our time," Ilea said, joining him as she checked his vitals. Everything seemed fine, but she couldn't heal soul damage.

"The shields protected me. There was no need," he said, giving a nod to the two waiting Liches.

Pain floated a little closer.

"You truly destroyed him," Pain said in a shaking voice, raising a hand to its face. Then it nodded to itself. "We must start, then. Before he reforms."

"Reforms?" Feyrair asked.

Ilea shrugged. "Yeah. So, there's a whole thing going on here, though I'm not entirely sure about it all."

"That doesn't explain anything."

Ilea sighed. "Death wanted to fuse them and become more powerful. Now they're going to fuse into Owl instead."

"Oh. I like Owl, that sounds great," Feyrair said, hissing with approval.

Ilea summoned the phylactery fragments and handed them to the Liches.

“I hope I’m not making a massive mistake here,” she said.

“We did not deceive you, wanderer,” Pain said. “Now come, Owl. You know the runes and chants.”

“I do,” Owl said. It sounded dejected.

They started summoning ice pillars, with complex runes slowly appearing on their surface, all glowing with soul and death magic. Pain started chanting in a language Ilea didn’t know, and Owl joined in after giving them a glance.

The ritual setup grew more and more intricate, and eventually, Pain ushered Owl to take her place at its center. It took several hours, and Ilea brought the Elders down as well at some point.

“It is ready,” Pain finally said, its voice somber. “Owl, you know what to do, don’t you? I believe I taught you, in case something happened to Death.”

“I know what to do,” Owl said. “Are you really sure, Pain? You will be gone.”

“I find it… strange… and difficult to remember. But I know this. There is nothing left for me here in this world. You will do what we failed to do,” Pain said, sounding contented. “I believe in you.”

Owl looked at the other Lich Fragment and nodded. “Thank you, Pain. For everything.”

“Fight well, Owl, for all of us,” Pain said.

Magic surged outward.

Runes and ice lit up with both soul magic and necromancy.

Pain raised its gaze, its arms slightly spread, its form serene despite its near-featureless body. “I remember now… Victoria,” it whispered as its body dissolved back into pure mana.

“What exactly are we doing here?” Verena asked.

“Sssh!” Pierce shushed her.

Ilea kept her attention on the gathering magic that swirled around the remaining fragment. Owl’s body glowed with power, congregating around her until it flowed into her form. Bright purple eyes shone at the center of the formation, chunks of ice flying in all directions as the room’s walls started to crumble.

Ilea slapped a few hundred kilograms of ice away, forming a protective zone around the others. Feyrair expanded into his dragon form a moment later, the chunks simply collecting on top of his wings.

A burst of death magic flashed out, sending cracks through the ground and walls, before a humanoid being emerged at the center of it all. Its form had an ethereal, shadow-like quality, with glowing purple eyes and a purple line indicating a mouth.

[Greater Lich – lvl ????] – [Undead]

Ilea looked at the creature from under Feyrair's draconic head, the Elders standing behind her.

So… was this all some kind of deception?

The Greater Lich sighed, then looked up and started sobbing. She remained like that for some time, more chunks of ice slowly cracking and falling from the surrounding walls.

"It's over," she said after a while. It was Owl's voice. "After all this time…"

She looked at her hands.

"Farewell, Pain, whose name I have forgotten. Whose face I have forgotten."

Owl gazed at the deep cracks forming in the walls.

"I see. That is why we had to move here."

Then she looked at the others for the first time since the ritual concluded.

"This dungeon has started its collapse." She sighed. "We should leave this place. May I?"

Ilea nodded.

Owl raised a hand before using a simple space magic spell to move them up through the dungeon. Ilea disabled her resistance and appeared with the rest of the group in the entrance hall where they had first encountered the Liches.

Owl looked back at the cracking floors and walls, then led them outside.

The weather was fine, the surrounding peaks reaching up toward the distant sky.

Owl floated in place. "It all looks so different."

“It’s still you in there, then? Did it work?” Ilea asked, approaching the Greater Lich, who was nearly level one thousand three hundred.

Owl looked at her. Her eyes seemed more focused than before, but somber, too.

“It worked, Ilea. I don’t know if I should curse or thank you, but it worked. And perhaps it is for the best.”

“You sound different.”

“Because I remember. I remember our purpose. And I remember our failures.”

“Do you want to share? It sounds like it weighs on you.”

Owl seemed to breathe in and sighed. “If you would care to listen? After what Death put you through…”

“Go on.”

“Then let this story end here, now, after all this time, in a place I no longer know,” Owl said. “We were human once, like you. A long time ago, though I do not know how long. These lands, if we are still somewhere near them, were different. Not so suffused with mana, and far less harsh. I can feel the residual magic from the creatures that dwell in these lands. A single one of them would have been enough to destroy our town. A town, yes… a town in R… Rhy…?”

“Rhyvor?”

“Rhyvor?” Owl tasted the name.

“It was a human kingdom once, here in the north,” Ilea said.

Owl shook her head. “Perhaps, though I cannot say for sure. What I do know is that there were invaders, creatures, or perhaps other humans, I do not remember. We had grown desperate, our protectors and warriors slain, having failed to curb this incursion. And so we sought other paths to power.

“Death magic and necromancy were known to many at that time, and so they were paths to power. To protect those close to me, I agreed to join the man who became known as Pain. He had lost many, as we all had. And we joined the man who became Death in our attempt to lift him up through death magic. He was supposed to protect us. To fight the hordes.”

“You don’t remember what you were fighting?” Verena asked.

“Only flashes. I believe it was a long time ago. And this I remember well… Our ritual did not fail, but even so, all was lost. It was too much to bear for Death, to see his efforts and our sacrifices succeed, and yet to fail

all the same. Something ruptured, and he split. We split yet again, knowing only our purpose, and not that we had failed.

“I don’t know how many times this repeated, but it was always Death at the helm. With every fusion, we grew more powerful but lost more of ourselves. And as we grew, the world around us changed. We were no longer human but the denizens of a dungeon. And whenever we succeeded in our ritual, we would split again, a dungeon would form, and beasts would seek our essence, tearing us asunder until we reformed again.”

“How do you know you won’t split again this time?” Pierce asked.

Owl looked at her and smiled slightly. “Hmm.” She looked at her ethereal hand. “Maybe I knew for a long time. I think, even as a fragment, I could tell that our purpose was long lost. But the others were still fighting, so I stayed with them. They were all I had left, you see?” “

“And now… Now they are gone – a part of me, but gone. Pain couldn’t see it. And Death, he was obsessed and only grew more so with every split. I did not have the strength to oppose him, nor the will. I suppose even now, if it hadn’t been for Pain and for your killing of Death, this would not have come to be. Oh, I see… I wasn’t ready to move on either, not then.”

She breathed in deeply. “But now here we are.”

“I’m sorry,” Ilea said.

“No. There was time to feel and grieve. I know this is the right path, even if I do not want it.”

“You’re a four-mark Lich now, though,” Pierce said. “You can do whatever you like.”

“I suppose,” Owl said. “And yet it feels hollow. Where would I even go? I don’t remember the lands I called my home. And while I now wield power beyond anything I ever had, what human would look at me as their equal?”

“I have weirder friends than you,” Ilea said. “Seems like you’ve got some things to figure out. And I know a place that might suit you. For a time, at least. There are all kinds of strange and super-powerful creatures there. I think you’d fit right in.”

Owl looked at her and considered the offer. “I’d prefer that to wandering the wilderness. You are sure they would not scoff at a being of death?”

Ilea smiled, then checked her key locator. It was now pointing south.

“I don’t think so. Let me introduce you to a good friend of mine,” Ilea said before she activated her third-tier Transfer. “Gather up everyone, we’re leaving.”

* * *

Her spell took hold, and the group appeared in the Meadow’s domain.

I still can’t get enough of this long-range teleportation. And with my anchor set near Nes and Scipio’s home, I can go back whenever I like.

“Hey, tree, I bring a new friend – and some interesting new information.”

“Ilea. A new friend indeed. This time around, you’re not the only one with news. But there’s no rush. Who is this?”

Ilea walked up to Owl, then spread her wings and flew up a little to touch her shoulder. “Owl, welcome to Hallowfort, and to the domain of the Meadow.”

“Is it… that tree? No, not only that,” Owl said with wonder in her voice. “This is incredible. A being of such power and life!” She deflated in the next moment. “Oh, but I’m an undead now, a being of death. I shouldn’t be here, not in a place like this.”

“Why not? You’re not even exuding some kind of death aura.”

Owl sighed, then leaned in close and whispered, “You know, I’m trying very hard not to.”

“You’re definitely the most considerate four-mark death spirit I’ve ever met. But I think you should be fine here, right, Meadow? If you want to stay for a while, that is.”

Owl looked around again. “This place is… interesting, to say the least. As are the beings that I see here. I think I need time most of all, to think on everything. And if this truly is the form I now take, then I will need some guidance, with all this power I now wield. I don’t think I was ever even a necromancer, not really, as far as I remember. But only if you would have me here.”

“*Owl, it is a pleasure to meet you,*” the Meadow sent. “*You seem considerate, and you are aware of your power. If you wish to stay, for a while or perhaps to find a home here, you are welcome. I’d be interested to hear your story. And while I’m not a being of death, I’m sure we could help*

you determine your newfound power. It is always a pleasure to experience and experiment with other schools of magic."

Owl nodded along, floating forward as she took in the Meadow's domain.

She's struck by wonder.

Yeah. I'm pretty sure she'll be alright here.

"This place is just getting more and more ridiculous," Verena said, summoning herself something to drink.

"You sound like you're complaining," Pierce said with a wide smile before she glanced at Feyrair. "Back to our bouts?"

He hissed affirmatively.

Ilea stretched and cleansed herself inside a cloud of ash before switching into casual clothes.

Four-mark Lich added to the roster.

She shook her head. Verena was right. This place was ridiculous.

She gazed over at the slow-moving machine currently floating a few meters above the ground.

[Pursuer of Akelion – lvl ???] – [Self-conscious]

"Hey there, murder machine," Ilea said, waving at the creature. "What are you doing?"

"The Meadow is helping me get used to this new form. It is very much unlike the Centurion. I fear I may cut apart any Sentinels I train with if I'm not careful."

"You sound excited about that. Well, I'm excited about that," Ilea laughed. "And I'm sure the Sentinels will be excited about that too."

Iana and Christopher rushed out of their facility at the same moment, their excitement palpable. They only gave the floating four-mark Lich a fleeting side glance before they focused on Ilea.

"Ilea! We did it!" Iana exclaimed.

"That is the news that I mentioned," the Meadow sent.

Iana came to a stop next to her. "And we need you for some final testing."

Ilea raised her eyebrows. "Final testing? You have a working gate?"

The young enchantress glowed with pride and anticipation. "Yes, Ilea. We have a working gate."

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FORTY-THREE

New Possibilities

Ilea joined the enchanters in their workshop, where she found two gates that looked pretty much the same as the first prototypes. Iana ushered her to stand on one of them and told her to disable her resistance.

“All three of us agree on the calculations, and we’ve successfully tested with non-living materials,” Christopher said.

“So this is the final test?” Ilea asked.

“No,” Iana said. “We’ll also test it with lower-level people. It’s a good thing we have a good range here already. Feyrair will come after you.”

Ilea smiled, and they got to testing.

Ambient mana kept the gates receptive, the key let someone use it, and to power the spell, the gate used mana from whoever used it, drawing more depending on their level of power or resistance. And yes, they had added a kind of circuit breaker during an earlier phase. Otherwise, if Ilea used her Space Magic Resistance, the mana fueled into the gate would’ve caused it to explode.

She stood on the platform, and the spell manifested as it had so many times before. Ilea watched the wisps converge, and she watched how the magic formed. She wasn’t good enough to point out what had been wrong before, but she could feel that the spell that now shaped around her was perfect. And with space magic, she knew that it had to be.

Ilea vanished and reappeared on the other platform. Without any damage, without any disturbance, without any issues she could notice with

any of her forms of perception.

“It works,” she said quietly, the enchanters looking at her before they rejoiced. “So it’s real, then…”

The weight of it hit her like a high-level creature. This would change the world.

“Finally,” the Meadow sent. *“Now I can get all of those books I’ve wanted.”*

“A lot more than that,” Iana said. “A lot more. Meadow, can you get Feyrair quickly?”

The elf appeared a moment later. He was teleported successfully, too, hissing to himself before he bowed to the enchanters and to the Meadow.

“This is quite a feat you have accomplished here. Now, please, send me back. I have a battle to win.”

Ilea watched as first Verena, then Goliath, and finally Christopher and Iana themselves were teleported, all of them successfully and without issue. As with her own teleportation magic, the gates sent someone through the fabric almost instantaneously. They had to be perfectly attuned to one another, and the spell had to be extraordinarily stable.

What some Classes accomplished through instinct and evolution, bound to single individuals who unlocked various teleportation spells, the Meadow and the enchanters had deciphered and incorporated into magically enchanted platforms, ready to be used by anyone. Like the Taleen before them.

“As far as I understand it, the range isn’t limited at all,” Ilea said.

She had her third-tier Transfer to compare it to, and they were similar in complexity and power. Her own felt more robust, but she only had an anchor to teleport to, most of the spell materializing from herself and sending her to a target. These gates, though, worked in tandem, two entirely connected points in the fabric.

“There’s a slight connection,” Ilea said. “Once the spell is established, it’s not a sender and a receiver like my own spell, but two spells working to form a connection. And there’s something else that feels different. These two only work with one another, right? They’re not like the network of the Taleen.”

Iana nodded with a grin. “You’ve gotten pretty good at deciphering space magic. The range shouldn’t be limited, no. Though we’ll have to do some more testing. The Meadow is of the opinion that it will be more than

stable and sufficient for travel within the same realm. However, we've had plenty of discussions about teleportation between different realms, not that we're planning to set up anything like that."

"The problem is less one of stability," the Meadow interjected, *"and more one of power and the potential dangers it involves. It has to do with the difference you have noticed. However, it is not the difference between the Taleen network and our gates, but the difference between your own long-range spell and the more active connections that these gates represent.*

"Traveling through the fabric may seem instantaneous, but it isn't. Teleporting from the northernmost point of this realm to the southernmost might as well be a calculation error compared to the distance to another realm.

"I have glimpsed into the void and space between, and while the chance of attracting the attention of something you would rather not attract is negligible with any one-time spells, having any active connections that are used time and time again, like these gates, would be a danger to anyone who uses them and perhaps their realm itself."

"So no inter-realm travel, then," Ilea said.

"Not with these gates," Iana said. "But that wasn't our goal in the first place."

They continued their testing, now teleporting small critters and insects with very low levels. While humans without a Class at all were technically below their level, their size and density, the Meadow explained, made them more resistant to the fluctuation of the teleportation.

With the last tests concluded, the enchanters collapsed into their chairs, overjoyed and exhausted.

The gates worked. And they would work for people and creatures of all levels, as well as for goods. What they had here, Ilea knew, would revolutionize trade, travel, war, and diplomacy. First of all, though, it would connect Ravenhall and Hallowfort, not just for her with her third-tier Transfer, but for everyone.

"Why the reduction to only two gates connected to one another?" she asked.

"The Taleen's network is more convenient," the Meadow said. *"However, our joint invasion of their network with the modified gate keys showed that their security is flawed. We tried to fix those flaws but found it impossible without destabilizing the teleportation in the first place. The*

solution we came up with is to simply key two gates to one another. They are built in pairs and correspond only to one another.

"The councils of both Ravenhall and Hallowfort agree that this is both more secure and more desirable in terms of diplomacy and stability. Any nation or city that agrees to install any gates will know exactly where they lead. We will require more of them, but that shouldn't be much of a problem considering what is gained."

It made a lot of sense. The Taleen were one united nation, as far as Ilea understood it, and from what the elves had learned and told her back in Iz, it was clear they didn't expect anyone to intrude on their network. The Taleen were exceptional enchanters, rune mages, and craftspeople, and they built technology that remained unmatched to this day, but that had also led to arrogance. Deserved, perhaps, but arrogance nonetheless.

"So, what are the next steps?" Ilea asked.

"I'm glad you asked," Iana said. "And I hope you have a little bit of time for us. Because we have a gate that we need to take south."

Ilea smiled. "I'm ready to leave at any moment."

"Before you go, you spoke of news when you arrived?" the Meadow asked.

"Right. I did. And I think it concerns you two as well," Ilea said. "It's about the first key I found in the north. The others don't know about this, and I'd like to keep it that way, because I promised not to compromise the people I found… Well, it was guarded by two very interesting and very powerful people. People who may visit here in the coming days, weeks, or months."

"Who did you find?"

Ilea grinned. "Scipio. An old friend of Maro's, from the time of Rhyvor. And his companion, Nes Mor Atul, a Navuun, or, as she'd like not to be called, an Ascended of Kohr, of the demon realm and the Great Salt. And I learned a few bits and pieces of history when I talked to them. Let me share all that with you, because we now have an idea of what these twelve keys really unlock, and what keeps the Taleen invasion running."

"An Ascended… yes… do tell."

Ilea shared everything she learned with the three of them and answered all the questions that she could. By the end of her explanation, Iana was pacing.

“Fuck. I hope this Scipio doesn’t arrive here while we’re gone and working on the gates. I want to talk to him.”

“I’ll ask any questions you might have,” the Meadow sent.

“Yes… yes, I know. But an Ascended! Imagine the knowledge that she has… and the technologies… The Taleen gates are just a single piece… impressive, sure, but the Descent, what Ilea has shared about Kohr and its facilities, and all this talk on a source, on taking a sun or its essence from the skies, to use as a power source… that’s beyond the realms of the Taleen, and perhaps even the elven Domains.”

“And I think it should remain beyond anyone’s realm. I am interested in talking with this Nes Mor Atul and this Scipio, certainly. And if their purpose is truly as noble as they claim, I will be happy to assist. But you don’t know when they will arrive?”

“I don’t, but I could ask,” Ilea said.

“No. That is fine. We will need to build trust and find common ground first, and that will take time. I will welcome them whenever they wish to visit.”

“Yeah,” Iana said. She rolled her neck and looked at Ilea with her blue eyes, which were glowing slightly. “We’ve got other things to work on, anyway. Ready? I can’t wait to show the Council.”

“I’m ready. I guess soon I won’t be needed for these teleportation trips,” Ilea said.

“Yes. We’ve made you obsolete!” Iana exclaimed and winked at her. “But it’s always good to have a backup plan. Even better when there’s a three-mark space mage attached to it.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Ilea said, activating her third-tier Transfer.

They were back in Ravenhall in no time. Claire immediately dropped everything to get as many members of the Council together as possible. It was clear that they had been prepared for the possible success of Iana, Christopher, and the Meadow’s work.

The group quietly left the city, soon entering a hidden facility in the mountains. Iana and Christopher summoned pieces of a gate platform into preprepared slots in the floor. Sulivhaan, Dagon, and the rest of the councilmembers who’d been in the city were helping, all of them past level two hundred and Shadows themselves.

Ilea helped as well, she and Claire setting down the last piece in accordance with Iana and Christopher’s instructions. Then they waited as

the enchanters finished the last bits of work to get the gate up and running, connecting the south to the Meadow's domain.

"So there won't be any gates within the walls?" Ilea asked Claire as they watched the enchanters work. The others were having conversations of their own. The atmosphere was both tense and excited.

"No. As much as it's a benefit, we deem it too much of a risk. Once we know they're safe to use, we will initiate production," Claire explained.

"When do you think an official gate will be ready? For everyone to use, I mean. And what are the plans for getting them in the hands of other cities?"

"Oh, I understand that a lot of rare metals are required to build the gates, so it will be a while. We'll have to buy up what we can before we publicize the gates to make sure we won't be dependent on any external suppliers in other nations. We'll want enough gate pairs to connect a lot of different cities. Once we have all that ready, we can start negotiating. This technology will cement Ravenhall not only as an important independent city-state, but as a major player in the Plains and beyond."

Magic flashed to life, and Ilea turned toward the platform.

Iana clapped her hands and smiled at the gathered people. "So, who wants to be first?"

More than half the council raised their hands. None of the people present had openly talked about any risks or dangers. Ilea wondered how much of it was their trust in the enchanters and how much was simply due to the fact that everyone here was a Shadow and very much wanted to experience this new marvel of magic.

In the end, it was Dagon who got the honor. He stepped on the gate, waved, and vanished. The gathered people reacted with tense excitement. A minute later, Dagon reappeared and raised a hand in joy, eliciting shouts of joy.

Ilea smiled as Iana joined her side, looking on as more councilmembers stepped on the platform, checked the key, and activated the gate. On the other side, they would meet the Meadow, teleporting from the very south of the Plains all the way to Hallowfort in the span of a second.

"Every horse and wagon trader will curse you," Ilea said.

Iana smiled. "I'm sure Kyrian can help us build up some resistance."

Ilea watched and joined the last people yet to use the platform. As she greeted Sulivhaan, Claire came up to them. The gate activated, and they

appeared on the edge of the Meadow's domain. The other councilmen and women looked around with obvious awe.

"We decided it's probably a good idea for them not to see Owl, Feyrair, Hereven, or Aki. At least for the time being," the Meadow sent.

"Probably for the best. The Council of Hallowfort will be interesting enough, though I guess they're Shadows, so they should be alright either way."

She could see the gathered councilors waiting for the last representatives from Ravenhall, with Catelyn standing at the center. The fox looked at her and gave her a slight nod. Ilea smiled and nodded back.

It felt like the start of something major.

An alliance of people she trusted. And of settlements she cared about.

Can't wait to have Riverwatch join as well.

The councilpeople of Hallowfort left for Ravenhall sometime later, Ilea joining in as they received a short tour of the city, veiled in illusions and shadow magic so as not to alarm the human citizens unused to the presence of Awakened. People would get used to it, but they didn't want the existence of the gates to become public quite yet.

When the tour was over, Ilea sipped from a glass of sparkling wine in a ballroom in Viscera, Iana clinking her glass with hers.

"So, now that you've achieved your goal, what are your plans?" Ilea asked.

"Oh, there's plenty. And we'll be involved in the production, too. Though I'd love to figure out more about Aki's current form and maybe study the rubble you brought from the Krahen Isles. Do let me know if you have anything pressing for us to work on, though."

"Nothing currently. I'll get in touch if I find something interesting. I can't wait for the Sentinels to start training with the Meadow and for them to experience the north."

"A lot of opportunities will come from this. But right now, I'm most excited to meet the people you mentioned."

Ilea smiled slightly.

Iana leaned in. "What about you? I don't expect you to get involved in trade agreements and diplomacy talks."

"No, probably not. I'll just get a summary from the Meadow or from Claire. I'll probably go and continue my search for the keys. It's been quite fruitful so far."

“Yeah, no shit. That was a four-mark, right? I barely had time to process that.”

“Yeah. She is. And I think Owl is very unassuming. I don’t think she cares much for her power either, which is nice. Either way, I’m glad she’s no longer in that dungeon.”

“Me too,” Iana said, sipping her wine.

And so the world is changed. Just like that.

* * *

Ilea used her own spell to return sometime later, rejoining her crew behind one of Meadow’s dome-like barriers.

“Quite a show,” Pierce said. “I’m kind of glad we’re not involved. So, are we heading out again?”

Ilea smiled. “I wanted to ask you exactly that.”

She had seen Verena briefly interacting with the various councilors, but she hadn’t joined the journey south.

“Will you be joining us again?” Ilea asked her.

“I will,” Verena said. “These past few days have been the most interesting and eventful since… since forever.”

Agreed.

Ilea clapped her hands together, creating a boom that echoed throughout the cavern. *Oh,* she thought, looking down at her hands.

“It’s been a while since I tried that,” she said, glancing at the three people looking at her. “We’re leaving.”

The Meadow saw them off a moment later, the group reappearing in the air south of Hallowfort. Ilea spread her wings to catch the elf and the berserker, Pierce already ahead with her crackling lightning.

They flew for hours, Ilea occasionally checking the locator but generally seeing very little change. *Might be the rest of the keys aren’t located in the north at all*, she thought, sure they would come up on the Naraza mountain range in another hour or two.

Soon after, she slowed down and came to a stop when the arrow turned to the west with a sudden motion.

“Got our next one,” she said with a smile.

“At this rate, you’ll have all of them before you get your third Class to the next evolution,” Feyrair said, cracking his neck before he stretched and

hissed a few times.

“Seems like high-level monsters are rarer than hidden Taleen artifacts,” Ilea said.

“You don’t have a high-level monster locator,” Verena pointed out.

Fair point.

Not yet.

They continued toward their next location, flying over mountains and canyons that looked the same as the hundreds of kilometers before.

But I’m not complaining. It would’ve been impossible to find all those interesting places without it. Random ass dungeons and tombs in the middle of absolutely fucking nowhere. And we’ve got quite a few keys left.

The arrow pointed toward a deep crack in the land, taking them toward a mountain. There was nothing remarkable about either. Ilea led the group down and into the canyon, the locator informing her that the key was somewhere ahead of them and down below. Based on how the arrow was moving now, she assumed they were getting reasonably close.

Hopefully we’ll have some more four-marks to fight.

“Tracks here,” Verena said, standing from a crouching position. “Heavy footfalls and large. Dwarven war machines.”

“Probably a settlement nearby,” Pierce said. “Maybe even a city or kingdom.”

“You two have visited dwarven cities before?” Ilea asked, following the guidance of her artifact.

“A few. They’re hard to find due to them all being underground,” Verena said. “And they usually don’t let anyone in. You need one of them to vouch for you, and even then it’s difficult.”

“A bother is what it is. If you want to see them, just sneak inside,” Pierce said.

Verena shook her head. “Can’t do that with the ones I’ve visited. They really like building unconquerable fortresses deep underground. All enchanted, too, and old. Some of these cities have been standing longer than any human settlements.”

Did the dwarves here survive the changes in the north, then?

She could see the tracks now, large imprints, most of them far bigger than those Terok would leave behind in his suit.

Then again, didn’t he mention he built his war machine for scavenging? I’d think they’d go more bulky with something meant to fight monsters.

Her thoughts were interrupted when they came around a bend in the canyon. They were that deep that sunlight reached only a small part of the cliffs above, but her enhanced eyes allowed her to see a distant entrance.

It was a stone gate carved with decorative runes, perhaps even functional. To each side, steel-reinforced bunker-like extensions had been built into the high stone walls. Jagged edges, bloodied spikes, and runes adorned the structures, likely meant as a warning to any creature thinking of venturing closer. It looked like a bloody, metal maw.

Ilea could just about make out a thin opening on each side that would allow someone to see out, but her sight wasn't good enough to make out if anyone was actually inside.

"Let's go and see if they let us in," she said.

"If there's even anyone here. Could just be another ruin," Verena said.

Pierce giggled to herself. "Hmm… yes. They do tend to dig out things they should've left far below ground."

"Demons of the ancient world," Ilea murmured.

"I don't think you'll find demons very often in these parts," Pierce said. "That Hereven fellow doesn't count."

Fey hissed in agreement.

Ilea continued onward, soon close enough to see the pairs of eyes waiting within the bunkers. One set was actually closed, the person apparently asleep. He jolted awake a moment later as a bearded person appeared, pointing toward the group.

"HALT!" a voice bellowed through the crevice.

Ilea did as he asked. "We're friendly!" she shouted back. "Here to visit and trade!"

"Only war machines and divers! There's no trade for you here! Leave, ash being!"

Hmm.

"Leave, or suffer the consequences!"

Fey hissed, bursting into flame.

Pierce glanced at him and smirked.

"Wait – let's leave for now," Ilea said, turning around and tapping Fey's chest.

"You would abide such a foolish threat?" he asked with another hiss.

"They warned us. We'd be intruding on their home," she said, giving the Elders a long glance.

Pierce scratched her cheek. Verena shrugged, pointing at Pierce. “Her idea.”

“War machines and divers?” Ilea asked as they walked away. “Let’s move upward and keep an eye on that entrance for a while.”

“Reconnaissance? From you?” Feyrair asked, amusement sparkling in his eyes.

“I know, right?” Ilea answered with a smile.

“I’ve seen a few dwarves use suits of armor powered by their own mana or other sources,” Verena said. “I believe they call those war machines.”

“I know a dwarf who uses one in Hallowfort. I could ask him if he knows the dwarves here,” Ilea said.

“Or you could just use your space magic to go in and get the key,” Feyrair suggested.

“That’s the last option. Let’s exhaust the others first.”

She wouldn’t shy away from stealing the key if the dwarves proved entirely too stubborn, but they had already given them a warning.

More reasonable than most things I’ve met recently.

And I’d like to see their settlement without rushing.

They sat down near a well-hidden rocky spot at the top of the crevice, occasionally hit by a few bolts of arcane lightning but otherwise undisturbed. Ilea could see the entrance and was fairly sure the dwarves couldn’t see them from within their bunkers. They were likely more focused on the inside of the canyon than its rim, especially during the day.

“Isn’t this just cute? Us common adventurers camping out here in the northern lands,” Pierce said with a happy sigh.

Verena groaned.

“Common? Sure…” Ilea said, looking up as a storm rolled by overhead. Lightning flashed, hitting Pierce and coursing through her. She moaned with apparent pleasure, laughing when nobody reacted.

At the sound of noises below, Ilea glanced over the side of the cliff. About half an hour had passed since they had been denied entry. She saw a single absolutely massive metal being, its pauldrons alone nearly as large as her entire torso. Its dust-covered steel was dented and showed more than a few scratches. It favored its right leg as it moved, advancing steadily.

As it passed through the canyon, she saw the being piloting the massive suit through her dominion, finding their anatomy similar to Terok’s. Her friend’s suit was considerably leaner than this hulk of steel, though.

A war machine. She took another look and smiled. *Looks like I finally get to use Goliath's gift.*

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FORTY-FOUR

Living Steel

Ilea felt the heaviness of each step, her mana and heat fueling the living armor around her. She was sitting at her full enhanced weight. She simply didn't see a reason not to increase it for more heat generation. With all this bulk, the added weight simply didn't make much of a difference.

Her eyes were covered, over half a meter of metal protecting her ash-covered form. Her ash mantle was unable to defend the massive bulk of her armaments. She took a careful step, the magic flowing through the armor helping a lot.

"You're a bulky, blind, armored idiot," Pierce said.

I can hear you. Though you're very muffled, Ilea thought. She wondered how that worked. When she didn't fuel the armor with heat and mana, she couldn't hear anything from the outside.

Something to do with its living quality? Whatever. Let's test this thing.

She summoned her Wyrm-eye rifle, casually lifting it with her titanic hands before she aimed at a nearby boulder. Ashen limbs extended from the angled slits in her back into the openings of the rifle, allowing her to use Embered Heart, both in a controlled way through the rifle and in its usual chaotic fashion with her ashen limbs.

Five times the charge speed, Ilea thought with a grin, a beam of energy and fire punching through the stone a moment later.

As pebbles rained down from above, Ilea tried to jump back. The armor rose only by a few centimeters, then came down with a loud crash and a

cloud of dust. While her eyes were indeed entirely covered, Ilea could see well enough with her dominion.

That could be a problem if an enemy managed to stop or impede that ability, but they'd still have to get through the insanely thick plate of heavily enchanted dark metal to get to her own armored form.

"Point taken," Pierce said, looking at the smoldering furrow behind the now non-existent boulder. "A ranged attack. Do you have anything for close quarters?"

Ilea didn't reply. The others likely wouldn't hear her anyway. Instead, she moved forward, not quite running, but at what a generous observer might describe as a light jog. Her rifle vanished as she kept moving, each step slow and deliberate. The impacts echoed through the vicinity as she built as much momentum as she could.

"Is she really going to…?" Verena asked, the three adventurers following the two-and-a-half-meter-tall titan with mixed expressions.

Ilea pushed forward, her right fist crashing into a rock formation with a devastating blow. Her body followed. Chunks of rock flew in all directions as her weight and momentum sent her barreling into the peaceful landscape. She got stuck halfway through the formation, using her fists to progress until they couldn't reach anything else, her right leg stuck in a small crevice.

"A true barbarian," Pierce said.

"Give her a second…" Fey replied.

Ashen limbs lashed out, a chaotic storm of several dozen bladed arms ripping through what was left of the formation. Ilea didn't stop there, unleashing a nearly fully charged Embered Heart in a sphere around herself.

As the spell extended out from her armor, chunks of stone crashed against the adventurers. Feyrair clapped a few times before Verena joined in.

"She's slow, that's true," Feyrair said. "But she's not much less destructive."

"But mobility is the main advantage we have against high-level monsters," Verena said.

"She won't be fighting those in that armor."

Pierce flew a little closer. "Defensively, it should be an upgrade too, though, or am I wrong? Until it's destroyed, that is."

Letters made of ash formed in front of the titan.

“Try. Mortal.”

“You’re just as human as I am, Ilea. Don’t you ever forget your roots, young woman, or I’ll befriend a dragon or something and get it to eat you,” Pierce said as lightning sparked around her. “Are you sure? I don’t think you want to go back for repairs.”

Ilea replied by forming ashen spears, aiming them at the flying woman. Her own wings were nowhere near enough to carry both the bulk of her armor and her own form, now nearly as heavy as the armaments.

Their comments were mostly right. Ilea wouldn’t consider using this piece of equipment against an unknown four-mark. It might’ve helped against the Wyrm’s sun attack, but generally, she much preferred her mobility and, especially, her teleportation. Displacement wasn’t enough to move the entirety of the Armaments of Lilith.

She raised her arm against the beam of lightning that came for her, several bolts crashing against her shoulders, chest, and head, but nothing made it through even a part of her metal defenses. *And I still have my mantle,* she thought, healing the slight damage to the armor.

It wasn’t nearly as fast to repair as it was to heal her own body or ash, but compared to timeless armor, the upgrade was substantial. It had reached the point where she could repair her armor during battle – though, granted, she likely wouldn’t be able to fight anything beyond a certain weight class.

The Meadow would rip this thing apart in seconds. Or would it? Maybe I should’ve tested it a bit more, including the healing aspect.

She asked the other two to join in, occasionally sending out an ashen spear or ten to make them move a little. Ilea could’ve tried to burn them out of the air with her Embered Heart, which – coupled with her defenses, beam cannon, and the heat generation boost from her weight increase – was most certainly her main weapon while using the heavy suit of living armor.

But right now, she wasn’t trying to test her offensive power. With her limited mobility and, more importantly, her dominion’s limited range, anyone with a few brain cells would stay at a distance, abusing her weaknesses until they managed to overwhelm her.

Not an easy thing to accomplish, though.

She saw Feyrair’s flames burn into her massive arm, and Pierce’s lightning didn’t quite leave a lasting impression either. *To be fair, their elements aren’t really made to plow through enchanted steel,* she thought while repairing the damage.

Ilea grinned when Verena entered her dominion, the woman charging forward with both axes at the ready. Her body glowed with magic before she vanished, several strikes hitting Ilea's armored back. She tried to turn around, but the Elder simply moved away, continuing her assault, each strike hitting harder, the impacts landing with dull notes.

Ilea decided to use her ash, lashing out with a few limbs against the woman, cutting deep into her flesh and forcing her back to regenerate. Ilea could've simply used her dominion to push destructive mana into the Elder, but where was the fun in that? Her grin faded slightly when a familiar red dragon came crashing down about ten meters in front of her, rearing back its head before a barrage of bright magical fire came for her.

Ilea formed burning ashen walls, and the barrage collided with her defenses. She formed more and more, but was quickly overwhelmed before she raised both arms, healing against the continuous damage from Feyrair's breath. *This is just ridiculous,* she thought, watching her living armor melt, metal dripping to the ground as his white flame burned into and through her.

The plating was reduced by more than half before the dragonling rushed forward, towering above her, albeit not by much anymore. His burning claws came down, biting deep into her metal shoulder and a part of her head, his body moving forward as he tried to pierce the titan's chest with his second set of claws.

Ilea laughed when his blow was stopped about three-quarters of the way to her mantle, the angle not quite perfect. She moved her half-molten arm and grabbed his, her heavily damaged armor repairing itself with the help of her healing.

The dragonling roared, using his massive form and strength to try and lift the titan, but his efforts failed, his clawed feet digging into the stone ground. Instead, he tried to bring her down, his claws still stuck inside the steel and slowly pushing deeper.

Ilea used her ashen limbs to help stabilize herself, her footing good enough to make his efforts fruitless. Feyrair was strong, even more so in this form, but there was a limit to how much he could move. Apparently, the limit was her.

Angling a few ashen limbs toward his extended arms, Ilea released a beam of energy, eliciting a roar from the dragon, who flapped his wings and jumped back, smoking bones revealed where her beam had struck.

Come at me, then, she thought, taking a step forward with her right arm raised and gesturing. The cuts on her shoulder and chest were reforming, much like the Executioner machines she had fought. *I suppose this is kind of how Aki must feel right now. Just a lot faster, and a lot lighter.*

The dragonling took flight and moved back, power pouring out from his form before he rushed back down toward her, burning claws extended, fire in his open maw.

Just as the claws were about to reach her, Ilea took a step forward. She ducked as well as she could, her massive knees bending as the ground slightly cracked. She could see the talons bite into her shoulder and brought up her fist, her aim perfect as she struck the monster's skull. His breath exploded outward over the northern landscape in a bright plume of destructive white flame.

The dragon turned his head, flames flickering in his throat, only for his eyes to meet an extended armored hand. His reptilian eyes narrowed before he turned back into an elf.

"I need those evolutions… why am I wasting time here?" he said, shaking his head.

Ilea appeared on top of her still-regenerating armor, holding on to its large head while using its shoulder as a seat. "You don't have to stay, you know," she said and smirked, happy with her victory. Though she had to admit, without her evolutions, she would've lost this one.

"You will use this thing… to get inside… but I won't be able to join. Meaning, yes, I think it's best if I find something else to fight. There should be something nearby."

"Sure. You have the mark. I'll let you know when I'm done here or if I need help."

"Good. May you be victorious, Ilea," Fey said, a bit absent-minded as he flew off.

"Great. Now you've wounded his pride," Pierce said in an exaggerated tone. "How will he ever recover from this?"

"Maybe he can put you down in a few more bouts," Ilea said, healing the rest of the damage to her lovely toy.

Suit of heavy living armor, not toy. Apologies, she mused, tapping its head. *But if you try to take over my body, I'll rip you apart*.

"Ahh, I wish. But he's gone now. What should we do?" Pierce asked, a storm cloud moving closer.

“I mean, he’s right. I’ll use this thing to get inside. You two could just wait, or you could go explore a bit.”

“We’re not quite as invincible as you are,” Verena said. “I think waiting is the best approach.”

Next to her, Pierce groaned as the first bolts of lightning crashed into the ground. “Can you not get us in, too? We could be your armorers, your slaves, or some kind of deployable human warriors.”

Ilea noticed more lightning coming from above than usual, most of which hit her armaments. She stored it when the damage became more extensive. It could survive a storm with the help of her healing, but she didn’t have to push it.

Living lightning rod, more like.

“I’ll see what I can do, bored Princess Pierce,” she said as she walked toward the crevice.

“Oh, thank you, brave adventurer. I will trust in your expertise at handling those barbaric ruffians!” Pierce shouted after her. She was now clothed in a blue dress that was immediately shredded by the next bolt of lightning.

“Gladys won’t be happy,” Verena mused in a dry tone.

Pierce waved her off. “Ah, that sellout can’t complain. Leaving Virilya to go south, just because this Lilith person offers this and that. A new market! The new center of commerce! Blah blah blah. How sad the influence of such a made-up myth upon the civilized lands of humanity is!”

“Are you done?” Ilea asked, jumping down into the canyon below, the two of them following.

Pierce changed into her armor and sat down on a nearby rock. “Yes, quite. Now go off on your task, wild one.”

Ilea smiled and changed back into her massive set of living armor. She took a knee, as hard as that was, and formed some words with floating ash. “I will not fail you, Princess.”

Verena’s laughter echoed through the cut in the land as Ilea made her way toward the protected entrance of wherever the next key was located.

I do like hanging out with this crew. Now, let’s see if we can’t get into this place.

She soon reached the same distance from the large entrance as she had before. This time, however, nobody stopped her.

“Welcome to the Pit,” one of the guards called, looking through the thin slit of the right-hand bunker.

Ilea looked over and formed words made of ash. “Greetings.”

“A mage. Interesting combination, and that looks like a living war machine. Quite capable too…” he said, then he burst out laughing.

The dwarf next to him joined in.

[Axe Warrior – lvl 204]
[Shield Breaker – lvl 230]

They can’t pierce Monstrous to see my true level, it seems, Ilea thought, checking the guards on the left but finding them at a similar level.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” another dwarf asked.

“No,” Ilea spelled out.

“Yeah, and you’re not dwarven either,” he said, his eyes glowing with magic now.

Ah. Discovered already.

“Is that a problem?” she asked with ash.

The dwarf shrugged. “Probably not. Hit that wall over there to show that thing isn’t just a mighty nice-looking piece of jewelry. We test everyone like that.”

Sure you do, Ilea thought, walking over to the indicated spot.

She didn’t even pull her arm back, simply slamming her armored fist into the stone. The heavy impact shook the area. Her hand was half a meter deep, and as she pulled it out, pebbles and debris fell to the ground. She didn’t need to ask if they were satisfied; their smiles and laughter, coupled with the sound of gold being exchanged, were enough of an answer.

“It seems to hold up, at least,” the dwarf said, taking a small pouch filled with coins. “You may enter. Just don’t cause trouble,” he added, eliciting another bout of laughter from the dwarves close by. He, too, had to crack a smile at that.

What is this place…?

Ilea formed another set of letters. “May I bring in companions? There are two humans in my employ.”

“May I… employ… I’m starting to think you don’t fit in after all.” The dwarf shrugged. “But aye, two is fine.”

Ilea leaned down a little closer, raising her hand before a cone of heat and energy flashed upward, leaving a furrow in the side of the crevice.

“Appreciate it,” she formed, waiting for the others to join her.

“You’re puzzling,” the dwarf said, not visibly impressed like the others. “No voice module, but a cannon like that. I suggest you check some of the stores. And don’t walk around without that on, I wouldn’t want you to get hurt. Except… well, if you’re here to start fights, that’s fair. I suggest you apply for the Dome either way. I’d love to see that thing in battle.”

Ilea gave him a steel thumbs-up as the Elders teleported through the crevice until they reached her side, both of them hiding their faces with hoods. The dwarf touched a nearby rune, and enchantments brought a mechanism to life, the steel and stone double doors slowly opening inward. Dents and scratches were clearly visible on the entrance.

“What is this place?” Verena asked.

“This is the Pit,” the dwarf said. “Now go in or leave. I don’t get paid enough to answer stupid questions.”

Pierce smiled and entered.

As Ilea followed with heavy steps, the gate more than large enough to let her pass, she overheard the guards talking among themselves.

“Strong bunch. How long will they last?”

“Depends where they go. And why they’re here.”

“Two gold that they just want to go down for metals.”

“Three gold that the big one joins the Dome, I have a feeling.”

Then the gates closed again behind the group, the noise from the mechanism drowning out the conversation.

They found themselves in an expansive, perfectly angular hall. The walls were stone. The floor was stone. There were no stores or houses, just a bunch of armored beings sitting on a few benches some dozen meters away. A rectangular tunnel with a somewhat steep slope led down, and it was large enough to fit ten of her, even in her armor.

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FORTY-FIVE

The Pit

“Greetings!” one of the war machines said, approaching.

Ilea appeared on top of her armor for a better look. She doubted not wearing the armor all the time would really be an issue.

The hall was lit by magical lights, a warm light filling most of the expansive area. The approaching war machine was piloted by a dwarf, the steel visor open to reveal a bearded face.

“The name’s Malan. Nice to meet all of you. I can show you around if you like.”

“What’s in it for you, Malan?” Pierce said, looking around before her eyes came to rest on the other two beings. “You guys here to offer your services too?”

We could use a guide.

One of them didn’t react. Now that she wasn’t inside her own armor anymore, Ilea could hear muffled snoring.

“Fuck off,” the other one said.

Ilea smiled and clapped her hands together. “Let’s go with that one.”

“Yes, I approve,” Pierce said.

Verena sighed and followed.

“Are you daft?” Malan asked.

His suit had various scratches, and its paint job was half done. His machine was about as large as Ilea’s, though it wasn’t nearly as dense or

compact. There were also dozens of weak points, one part near his legs even showing his actual body.

Pathetic. I'm the far superior war machine.

"Can you show us around? We're gullible tourists," she said.

[Stone Warrior – lvl 200]

"I'd rather blast myself with a heat-propelled steel piercer than play guide for you lot," the second dwarf answered.

"He's clearly the right choice," Pierce said. "Go on, pay him."

"Aren't you supposed to be the princess?" Ilea asked. She noticed the dwarf tense up at the mention of a princess.

Hmm, curious.

"Yes, and I order you, with the royal power given to me through a history of violence and conquest, to pay this poor dwarf."

"You're out of gold… again?" Verena said, looking at the other Elder.

Pierce's eyes went wide before she crossed her arms. "Outrageous! Defaming accusations, I tell you. My finances are of no concern to a lowly plebeian like yourself."

Ilea summoned a few gold pieces. "How much do you want?"

"How much do you have?" the dwarf asked.

She flicked two pieces his way. "Another two if you do a good job."

Ilea wondered how valuable gold even was to them, given the guards outside had bet several pieces on seemingly casual wagers.

"Double it, and I'm yours for the day," he said.

Ilea paid up, not even checking how much gold she had in her necklace.

"Great. That'll pay for my crippling whiskey addiction."

The dwarf's machine came to life, the thing standing up. He stretched. More than one bone and piece of metal cracked and creaked as he did so.

"What's your name?" Ilea asked.

"Bralin. And we're not getting friendly just because you paid me."

Pierce started walking toward the tunnel. "I assume it's this way to the Pit?"

Bralin didn't answer but followed her with long strides. "You should put that thing on, by the way. Humans aren't exactly welcome around here, nor anything else not a dwarf." He paused. "Even most dwarves, to be honest."

"I can't speak while it's on," Ilea said.

“Really? Where did you get that thing, then? I doubt you made it yourself.”

“Why would you doubt her engineering capabilities?” Pierce asked.

The dwarf glanced at her, the slit in his helmet showing his black eyes. “Just a guess.”

“It’s made to kill, not to talk,” Ilea answered. “But yeah, you have something that solves that problem?”

“I do – well, not me, but the people I *work* for. Somber Core Smithy. They’re alright. Not the best, not the worst. I can make sure you don’t get anything faulty for ten percent of whatever you spend. But trust me, it’ll be more expensive if you go there without me.”

“What’s one speech item going to cost?”

“Thirty silver? Around that. It’s not incredible, but it’ll do the job. I suggest you take one that is battle-approved. Wouldn’t want to have it break in the middle of a massacre. I do hope you’re not here for reasons of war?”

“How come you think that?” Ilea asked with a perfect smile.

“You give me the shivers. These two are strong, but you… you’re some kind of monster. That living armor is the best I’ve set my eyes on for decades, if not ever. And you treat it like some kind of toy. Most of us here would murder to get our hands on such a machine.”

“We’re not here to kill anybody. But the Dome *was* mentioned. I assume it’s some kind of battle competition?”

“Yes, it is. And sure. I can show it to you and help you sign up. So I can bet against whatever poor fool is standing across from you.”

“What is it, exactly?”

“A dome. Well, it’s upside down… It’s more of a bowl, really. But ‘The Bowl’ doesn’t sound as good. There are fights between war machines. Team fights, fights against monsters, tests of strength and durability. That sort of thing. Some are to the death, some just until one gives up. But you won’t see any of the better machines in there, more shit like this,” he said, tapping his own helmet.

“You didn’t make that one?” Verena asked.

He grunted. “You seem surprised. You’ve been to dwarven cities, I assume. The Pit isn’t quite as beautiful or pretentious. Most of those pissers in the kingdoms haven’t ever had their chest plates dented in by a mature elf or a wartroll.”

Really? At level two hundred? Ilea checked him with Veteran. *Oh. I see.*

It turned out Bralin was closer to three twenty. Why and how he hid his actual level from her was a mystery.

“How are you hiding your level?”

“Ah… you noticed. I’d appreciate it if you’d keep that to yourself,” Bralin said. “It’s a skill related to my heritage. Nothing I could teach, I’m afraid.”

“You’re hiding your level?” Pierce asked.

“I said keep it down. Or you can find another guide.”

“What’s he at?” Pierce asked Ilea.

“Three twenty,” Ilea supplied.

“Damn, higher than me. You’ve suddenly become a lot more interesting, Bralin,” Pierce said, walking a little closer to him.

“I’m not attracted to humans,” he said.

“Shame,” Pierce answered.

“Why hide it?” Ilea asked.

He glanced her way. “You’re doing it too.”

“Yeah, but three marks is a bit different.”

“I have my reasons,” Bralin said, and he left it at that. “To get back on topic, a lot of dwarves here don’t use war machines they’ve made themselves. If someone gets squashed in the Dome, it’d be a waste not to sell the machine. It’s their main business next to betting, actually.”

“What are the rules against using your own body to fight after the war machine is destroyed?” Ilea asked.

“None. Most folks would get obliterated even more. In your case… hmm. It wouldn’t be against the rules, but rules only mean something until they don’t. If you get what I mean.”

“Gotcha. I’ll stay inside,” Ilea said with a smirk.

“Smarter, definitely. For everyone. Though you don’t strike me as someone who’d wipe out an entire settlement for no good reason,” Bralin said.

Why would you even think that?

The hallway led farther underground for several kilometers, the occasional war machine walking or flying past them.

“Is there only one way in?” Verena asked.

“From the stormlands? Probably. Yes. But most of us don’t go there. Not with the Pit,” Bralin informed them. “The Pit is both the city and, well, the pit. It was a former prisoner town ages past. Only goal was digging

down for whatever metals, treasures, and monsters they could find. It's at a respectable depth now, though the lower levels are too dangerous for most. Are you here because of that?"

"It does sound interesting," Ilea said. "What kind of monsters are there?"

"Hard to say. Some have died over the years digging further down. Entire sections are off limits and rarely entered now. I'm sure you can imagine the kinds of creatures lurking down there with your experience. You *are* human, aren't you?"

"I am," Ilea reassured him. "How's the settlement still here? If you're constantly going down."

He glanced at her and started laughing. "Yeah… well, there've been… incidents. And there'll be more. But enchantments and various defensive measures, cave-in options, and well… explosions. Explosions work well pretty much every time."

"How reassuring," Verena said.

"I'm sure you three will be more than fine," the dwarf said with a slight chuckle.

They soon reached a massively oversized gate made entirely of enchanted steel.

Ilea looked up to see the top about thirty meters up. "This is ridiculous."

"It really is," Pierce said. "Boring design, too."

"And a waste of steel," Verena added.

"You should wear your armor now," the dwarf said.

Ilea obliged.

He walked past them and knocked on the massive gate. Magic surged out from where he touched it, rippling through the entrance before the heavy doors slowly opened outward, stopping with a few meters of space in between.

Two war machines greeted them, both wielding halberds with a near four-meter reach. "Those two?" one of them asked, pointing at the Elders.

"With this one," Bralin said, nodding to the dark set of living armor.

"Go on, then. Gate can't stay open," the other dwarf said, ushering them inside.

Ilea followed Bralin through the gate. Beyond, a large smooth steel platform extended toward what she assumed was the city, an enormous stairwell nearly twenty meters wide leading down. When she thought she

was far enough away from the guards by the gate, she transferred outside and in front of her armor.

Her eyes adjusted immediately, the darkness of her armaments giving way to warm magical light coming from massive devices built into the cavern ceiling. She blinked her eyes, looking at the even surface above. Everything was perfectly angular and lined with metal. Before her sprawled a city of lights, buildings of various sizes and forms sitting in a bowl-like depression, many reflecting the magical light in different colors.

While the structures themselves looked different, they all seemed to follow a rather brutalist style. Everything was a combination of angles and flat surfaces. A lot of the stone buildings were simply rectangular boxes. The structures higher up on the slopes had more complex designs, though; some had several floors and balconies, others were more pyramid-like with various extensions. She even saw a few that looked like simple monoliths.

Ilea saw buildings made entirely of gold, silver, and bronze, or at least of metals or alloys with a similar sheen. There were some with a blue hue, others with a green one, and some were even entirely black, much like the olvor that made up her hammer. The underground city spanned quite far, though it was nowhere near as large as Iz or even a city like Riverwatch. It did, however, feel like the Pit made up for what it lacked in sprawling size with density.

“Fitting name,” Pierce mused, even her voice not quite as mocking as it usually was.

“Right,” Ilea said with a smile, looking at the circular abyss, hundreds of meters wide, at the center of it all. Metal structures, railings, and war machines were visible both near the top and down its sides.

“Welcome to the Pit,” Bralin said, not sounding nearly as bored as he had back at the entrance.

“Please tell me you don’t have a gold house,” Pierce said, frowning.

The dwarf chuckled. “No, I prefer something a little less pronounced. And a bit more sturdy.”

“Are those cannons?” Ilea asked, looking at the dozens of large, tube-like extensions mounted on the rim of the round pit, their ends a little like barrels and aiming down into the hole.

“Good eyes,” the dwarf remarked. “Yes. There are a few things where everyone agrees to chip in: metals, time, and most importantly, knowledge.

We've sent four-marks back into the depths, not just scared but crippled and dying."

Ilea whistled. "How much for one of those things to shoot me?"

Pierce grinned. "You're mad. I want to see it."

"That's not a request I've heard before," Bralin laughed.

"You're a pretty decent guide, by the way," Ilea said.

He shrugged. "You paid. I play guide. And if you want to get shot by some cannon, I'll be there to see it happen. But let's get you that speech module first."

He continued talking as he led them on.

"I assume it's clear who the influential people are based on the state of the housing. There isn't a single ruler or government in the Pit, though. Various groups and mostly high-level individuals have a say in whatever comes up. General rules include no stealing, no destruction of property, and most importantly, no match fixing."

"What about killing? Basic rights? Healers? Work?" Ilea asked.

"You're free to kill anyone you like. But make sure you're prepared to deal with whoever will come for vengeance. There are few healers here, but there's a lot of work. And a lot to learn. But you'll have to make your own way in the Pit," Bralin answered. "The Champion of the Dome generally has the most influence, but that's not always been the case. The current one is Helwart Maulstroem. Not quite as dim as the last one."

"What happened to the last one?" Verena asked.

"Crowned himself king. Then he was promptly killed and thrown into the pit. That was a glorious night. Two whole districts were leveled," he added with a bellowing laugh. "Ah, but it's better when the fighting doesn't get too extensive. My forge was destroyed entirely."

"You have a forge? But are employed by a smithy?" Ilea asked as she watched a few war machines taking flight in the distance, one with fire coming out of its boots. The thing flew for a moment before taking a sharp turn and hitting a building, sparks visible even at this distance.

"Yeah, most of us have our own forges, or shared ones. A lot goes into making a working war machine; the tools and materials are neither cheap nor always easy to get. I can only manage general repairs in my home. Saves me plenty of silver," Bralin explained, making for the stairwell.

Ilea followed, surprised there was enough space for her massive form on the broad steps. The Elders next to her seemed like children.

“A lot of the war machines date back to the prison days,” he continued. “Older designs were simply made to carry more ore and let dwarves scale the pit efficiently. The tools and weapons help with digging, too.”

“I’ve seen war machines in other dwarven cities,” Verena said.

“Of course. It’s unclear when it all started, but I’m sure more than one of us rock brains had the idea to make a powered suit out of metal. I’m more surprised that other species don’t do it as often. But much of what I’ve seen outside the Pit is made to look intimidating, entirely focused on strength or defense. Ceremonial, almost. If the Royal Guard of Parior participated in the Dome, I’d bet my gold on one of our semi-decent fighters.”

“You have lots of confidence,” Ilea said.

But then again, the Royal Guard of Kroll wasn’t particularly impressive either. So I guess I could say the same about the Shadow’s Hand.

“Well, any one of you could likely kill the entire kingsguard of any human nation. Last I heard, they’re not particularly impressive.”

“They’re really not,” Pierce confirmed.

Verena shrugged. “No wonder when most of them have only been sitting around a throne room for decades.”

Ilea followed them in silence, taking in the various buildings, pubs, restaurants, shops, and smithies. Smithies were really the dominant structure, or perhaps everything else simply had a smithy attached to it.

Most of the people were dwarves, but there were occasional lizardpeople, humans, and Awakened. Few were wearing a heavy suit of armor, but there were enough to make their prevalence clear. She got plenty of looks and comments from the folks passing by, mostly impressed or envious. A few were accusatory or belittling, suggesting whoever was piloting the armor wasn’t worth the materials and work.

She had a hard time disagreeing with the latter. Goliath was an insanely good smith, while she had spent very little time actually using the armaments. Ilea wasn’t a war machine pilot who, like Terok, had worked her way up from simple designs she had made herself to arrive at the powerful tool she had now.

“Here we are,” Bralin said after a fifteen-minute walk, leading the three of them into a silver monolith nearly forty meters in height and half as wide. “Let me get you what you need,” he said, stepping past crates and

piles of scrap metal, his massive form not touching a single thing as he passed.

"You do look rather clumsy in that thing, now that we've seen the people here," Pierce admitted.

"I'm working on it," Ilea said.

I won't disappoint you, Goliath. Don't worry, I have the power of overwhelming recovery, fire beams, and ash on my side.

Besides getting that Taleen key, she now had a new goal here in the Pit. Several new goals, in fact. Go fight in the Dome, and get shot by one of those cannons.

Maybe I can even get that cannon design for Claire. Now that would be cool to see on the walls of Ravenhall.

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FORTY-SIX

Reputation

As Ilea looked at the third device the dwarf had given her, Bralin examined the Armaments of Lilith.

“I like this one,” Pierce said, talking into a mouthpiece. A deep vibrating voice emitted from the piece she held in her hand as she spoke. “None shall remain.”

“You could come. Dwarven city here. Let me know,” Ilea sent to Feyrair, imagining she could get him inside with Bralin’s help. She saw his mark but didn’t receive an answer, so she assumed he’d found something suitable to train with and didn’t want to waste his daily message in case he ran into trouble.

She raised a device to her mouth and spoke into it. “I am Lilith, and you will bow to my will,” she said in a deep, whispering tone with a downright mechanical quality to it. “I think I like the one you have more,” Ilea said to Pierce. “I’ll take it.”

“Will you start living up to the myth?” Pierce asked.

“Just prepping for my inevitable ‘lives long enough to become the villain’ phase,” Ilea said, showing the piece to the dwarf.

“Sure, throw it over, I’ll install it,” Bralin said. “We usually do it in this part here,” he added, tapping the armaments below the left arm where a human’s rib cage would be. “Generally hard to reach, let alone penetrate.”

“You want to put it inside the steel?” Ilea asked.

“Of course. It’s living armor. It will simply regenerate around the piece. Just have to make sure it’s not covered entirely.”

“Wouldn’t that create a weakness of its own?”

“Normally, no. This isn’t just a piece of scrap metal; it’s a hardened alloy with an enchanted core that receives and creates your voice. Only works with a direct connection of the same mana. I’d say that in this case, it’d actually be a weakness, seeing how well-made your armor is. Does that matter to you?

“I could fix it to your shoulder or neck instead, but any random area spell or direct hit would likely rip it off,” Bralin explained, lifting the arm with some difficulty. “Can’t believe you have enough mana to power this thing,” he muttered. “What are the openings on the back for?”

“You’ll see,” Ilea said, handing over the piece. “Under the arm is fine.”

“You’ll sound like some kind of undead lich,” Pierce said. “Were you perhaps inspired?”

“Maybe. Though I prefer my living armor to being some floating wisp of death magic. Bralin, do you have something that could emulate sight?”

“There are various tools that have perceptive qualities, but nothing like what I believe you’re looking for. I’m unsure why your set here didn’t create anything for your eyes to look through, but there must’ve been a reason.”

Well, yes, I have another way to see, Ilea thought, wondering if her own mana, her subconscious, or the armor itself had weighted protection for her eyes higher than her ability to see.

“Easiest solution is to drill a hole and stick a tube in it,” Bralin said, grabbing a nearby tube to see if its length would be enough. “But your sight would still be very limited. It’s just too thick to allow for reasonable peripheral vision. You could just remove the helmet altogether, but that’s not something I’d suggest. With living armor, there’s a chance it will adapt to your wishes if you continue to use it. Depending on how long you’ve actually fought in it.”

“I haven’t used it much,” Ilea admitted, touching the massive titan.

“A shame, really, but not uncommon with the best machines,” he said, smiling to himself before he looked back at the armaments. “I’ll have to drill the hole for the voice module first, which might take some time. You three can get some drinks on the house while you wait. There’s a bar one floor up.”

“Great,” Pierce said, vanishing.

Verena walked off, inspecting some of the ongoing work, then glanced back at Ilea.

“Give me a second,” she said, forming a small ashen drill as she walked past Bralin. Then she grabbed the heavy steel arm and held it aloft, letting the drill touch the armor. “About here?”

“Yes,” Bralin said, raising an eyebrow at the drill.

Ilea made the thing spin and slowly pushed it into the steel.

It is pretty durable, she thought, her hardened ash slowly going deeper.

“I’ll be upstairs,” Verena said with a wave.

“Sure,” Ilea answered, pausing to remake the tip of the drill.

Bralin chuckled next to her. “With bloody ash.” He looked at her and then back at the hole, now large enough to fit the tool.

“Any other upgrades you’d suggest?” Ilea asked.

The dwarf considered but ultimately shook his head. “Nothing I can think of to make this more deadly than it already is. Most of the power comes from you, and the speech module is already creating a small weakness.

“I tell you what. I’ll talk with the boss and try to get a deal. If you win a single match in the Dome, which you will if you fight, you’ll get replacements for that module until you don’t need it anymore.”

Ilea summoned the locator while he installed the module.

Oh? Looks like it’s in the city. And I already want to participate in the Dome. Maybe I can kill a few birds with a single titanic fist.

“I thought no match fixing was the most important rule,” Ilea said in a dry tone. She got into her armor and spoke through the mouthpiece. “Do you have that much faith in me?” she asked, turning her massive steel head toward the dwarf.

“I trust in steel, not faith,” he answered. “And your steel will make us a lot of gold.”

“I get half of the winnings,” Ilea said in her deep vibrato, her intimidation gaining at least a few bonus points with the voice module.

“I suppose that’s fair. But only if you’re announced as a sponsored fighter by this forge. Otherwise, we might run into trouble if you want some of the winnings from bets not placed by yourself.”

I’ll bet plenty myself, Ilea thought with a grin. *Always nice to come back to Claire with new coffers of gold. Maybe I shouldn’t bet too much, though,*

or I might cause the whole town to come after me.

"How much can I reasonably bet before I'm hunted instead of paid?"

Bralin laughed, now back in his own machine. "That's hard to answer. I suggest you have your friends bet in your stead. When would you be up for a fight? And what would you like to be called?"

"I'll have a think about when. And… let's go with Lilith. Have to spread the name," she said, as if it was inevitable.

"Lilith. That works. Care to have a drink too?"

"Sure."

"Who made that thing, anyway?"

"A friend. Who knows? Maybe I'll introduce you to them at some point."

He scowled at her.

"What's that look for?"

He shook his head and led her upstairs. "If you moved a little more naturally, I'd take you for some legendary Flame Butcher or Soul Warden."

"War machines of olden times?" Ilea asked, still sounding like some kind of B-list villain.

"Indeed. There are those that come close in this day and age, but there has been peace for centuries."

"You make it sound like that's a bad thing," Ilea answered as they went through an oversized gate into the largest bar she'd ever seen. It looked more like a storage hall, really, but the wood, warm light, and stools added a nice atmosphere. The stools were both dwarven-sized and, well, war-machine-sized.

Bralin laughed. "Ah, well, peace isn't bad, but it's less interesting, wouldn't you say?"

Ilea sat down on a reinforced steel bar stool, the heavy pole under the seat groaning under her weight. She decided to tone down the increased heat generation.

The barkeeper was in a war machine, too. He whistled when he saw her, his clean-shaven and scarred face currently uncovered, his metal face shield pushed to the top of his helmet. "Haven't seen a beauty like that in ages," he murmured. "And not a dent on her."

"It heals," Ilea replied in the deep voice of the titan.

"I want no trouble, mister," he said. "What can I get you?"

Ilea ordered a few local ales, hoping a hidden dwarven city based around war machines, arena fights, and digging an ever-deepening hole to the very core of the world would have some capable brewers.

As she waited for her ale, she transferred out of her armor and sat down on its shoulder, enjoying the looks of the few patrons and the barkeeper.

Her ale expectations weren't just met but blown entirely to the moon. Each tasted incredible in its own way. The diversity was surprising enough, but the fact that she loved all of them was the real shocker.

"You're getting a lot of attention," Pierce mused. "Ever been with a dwarf?"

Ilea smiled. "No. And I don't plan on picking up someone who's drinking in a pub at…" She glanced around and spotted a mechanical clock on one of the walls. "Eight in the morning."

"What does that say about us, then?"

"We're excluded. Or do you still adhere to a normal sleep schedule?"

Verena chuckled. She had a wide grin on her face, swirling her whiskey in its glass. "This is the best vacation I've had in a while. Thanks… Lilith."

"The Pit has a lot to offer," Bralin said as he relaxed on a massive bench, leaning his armored back against the wall.

"Speaking of which," Ilea said. "That massive hole, can we just go down there and kill a bunch of monsters?"

He shrugged lightly, taking a sip from his pint. "You can. But I suggest you sign up with the guild first. If you happen to finish any jobs or find treasure, it's a much simpler process to get paid if you are. Granted, you'd make more if you had a lot of connections and sold everything yourself, but you don't strike me as someone who'd be interested in that."

"Yeah, the guild sounds better. We can go there after this."

They've dug into the depths, and I should take advantage of that while I'm here. Maybe we can find some interesting monsters to fight. My third Class is getting close to five hundred, after all.

"I can take you there. It's not far from the Dome registration," Bralin said before he downed his drink. "I'll check with the boss and be back in ten, twenty minutes. Sound good?"

"It does."

Bralin smiled and walked off. "Drinks on the house, Grahn!"

The barkeep nodded. "Figured."

“Did you find out where the key is?” Pierce whispered as Bralin disappeared.

“In the town.”

“Hmm, still want to go down into the pit, then?”

“I do. My third Class is getting close to five hundred, and where better to find some powerful monsters than in some ancient pit dwarves have been digging for millennia?”

“You will doom this town,” Pierce said. “And I’ll be there to watch it happen,” she added, a lute appearing in her hands before she started playing a tune.

“You play the lute?”

“Gods, not again,” Verena murmured, downing her drink before refilling it from the bottle she had already gotten.

“Well, for all those lacking levels, I have to have at least something to show,” Pierce said. “Ah, my fifties were quite… exciting. Just, well, not in terms of dangerous monsters.”

Verena downed another drink.

“You’re pretty much immune anyway, what’s the point?” Ilea asked.

“If you think whiskey is just there to get drunk, you shouldn’t be allowed to drink it,” Verena said.

“Fair enough,” Ilea replied, enjoying her ale.

They didn’t have to wait long for Bralin to return, a few war machines following him into the bar. They were obviously wearing higher-quality armor than him, but none of them was even close to his real level.

“So you’re Lilith,” one of them said.

Ilea downed the last pint in a single go and vanished into her armor, the machine powering up as her mana and heat spread through it. She found she was a little taller than the others.

“I am,” she said in her deep voice.

“The V-830. A good choice. Though a mount would’ve been better if you plan on fighting with it,” the lead dwarf said, glancing at Bralin.

“She knows about the weakness,” he replied. “Hence the replacement deal.”

“And what if she loses?” another dwarf said.

“He’s got a feeling. That’s why he’s shouldering half the risk,” the first dwarf said.

Ilea caught a grin on Bralin's face. *Smart move,* she thought, hoping now that she wouldn't disappoint all of them with a subpar performance.

Going down into the pit could help with that. I'll just have to use the armaments.

Need some time though…

"Four days," Ilea said. "That's when I'll go into the Dome."

"Doesn't matter when," the head dwarf said. "Bralin, you know I trust you. The machine is good, I'm just concerned about the pilot."

Ilea appeared outside of it. "Hmm?"

Her voice froze everyone without second-tier Veteran, which was most of the patrons. Bralin and the barkeep could still move, as could a few others, but not the group in front of her. She spread her wings and slammed her fist deep into the thick steel plate of the first dwarf's armor, lifting the heavy machine up so that it met her eyes.

"The machine isn't what you should fear."

She let him fall to the ground and vanished into her armaments, which began heating up again. "Let's check out the guild," she said, and the entire group in front of her stepped aside to let her pass.

Hah. I did the thing. The intimidation thing, she thought with a smile. *That might've been a bit much. I think the voice module got to me.*

Bralin followed and burst out laughing when they emerged outside. "Wonderful performance! Ah, what a good day this is, what a good day."

"Just wait until you see me get splattered by one of those cannons."

"If you manage to get into the higher ranks of the Dome… you know what, I'll pull a few strings and make it happen. As absolutely stupid as it is."

"You're still underestimating her," Pierce said. "She's like some kind of indestructible manifestation of my failings. Maybe she's not real at all," she added, touching the armaments before dodging the heavy arm that came for her.

"Do not resist me," Ilea's voice boomed as she took a step toward the woman.

"Please, ladies," Bralin said, getting a glare from Pierce and a blank, featureless face from Ilea. "You know what? I don't care."

"Good choice," Verena said.

Ilea quickly gave up, the Elder's speed simply too much for her to handle. Instead, she just displaced her into her massive steel hands.

“Now you are mine.”

Pierce opened her eyes wide and grinned when her body started to get crushed, moaning in an entirely exaggerated manner.

If anybody nearby hadn’t stared yet, they were staring now.

Ilea threw her at a nearby building, and the Elder slapped against it like a piece of raw meat, her laughter soon echoing through the street.

“You know I could’ve just snapped your head off?” Ilea asked a few streets farther down in the bowl-like city.

“Ah, I wish…”

“You cannot defeat her,” Verena said. “Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Who are you people, anyway?” Bralin said.

“Do you know the Shadow’s Hand?” Verena asked.

“The mercenary order from the southern Plains. Yes, but it’s rare to see members up in the stormlands. It’s been decades since I last met one of you.”

“It’s a surprise that you’ve met any at all,” Pierce said.

“We’re Elders in that order. And Lilith here… well, she’s a little more than that,” Verena said.

“Heavier for sure,” Pierce said.

“It’s called density, and it’s a good thing,” Ilea said.

“A living deity of some kind,” Verena said. “That’s what she is.”

“I wouldn’t question it,” Bralin said. “As long as she can fight as well as her level suggests.”

The two Elders looked at each other.

Ilea huffed into her receiver, towering over the others with a smug air of superiority. “By the way, I don’t plan on killing anyone in the Dome.”

“That works. Unconscious is a win, too, as is getting them to submit,” Bralin said. “It’s just much easier to kill someone.”

“I will find a way,” Ilea boomed, balling the titan’s metal fist.

“Those poor fools,” Pierce sighed. “I’ll be cheering them on.”

“Why would you not cheer for me?”

Pierce glanced at her. “Isn’t it obvious? To see their hope turn to ashes as you demolish their machines and break their bones.”

“You said four days. I can help you train if you like,” Bralin said. “To make sure you don’t look like a wobbling child piloting an advanced set of living armor.”

“I’ll figure that out in the pit,” Ilea said.

“Well, you’re aware of the risks. Real experience is always better, though. Good luck,” he laughed.

Bralin led them into a large stone building, stairs leading up to it. Several massive gates were built into its rectangular side, all of them open. The war machines’ density was much higher here, dozens of them sitting or walking around.

“Do we have to do a test or something to join?” Ilea asked, getting a few looks, but nobody here seemed stupid enough to ridicule her.

Bralin huffed. “No. You just need to register. We don’t handhold our adventurers like you lot.”

Ilea thought of the Sentinels and laughed. “Sure.”

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FORTY-SEVEN

Titan

Ilea stood at the top of the abyss, a circular chasm below her with massive cannons and war machines all around. Her fight in the Dome would be in four days. Right now, she was an entirely unknown new fighter and would apparently be taking on a promising young dwarf. She felt a little bad for him already, but it would surely be a valuable lesson.

The guild had offered her a few jobs, but generally, they just took everything the divers found to categorize, organize, sell, and deliver to the various smithies in the town. One of the most interesting jobs was an ancient notice asking divers to investigate a deep part of the caverns, apparently called the Shining Caves. Few who went in there came back, and those who did were no longer quite themselves.

Ilea assumed some high-level mind magic to be at play. And what good war machine titan would let such a dangerous creature endanger the locals? The location was rather deep, too, which would allow them to have a look at various dangerous sections of the pit on the way down.

“You have the map, right?” Ilea asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Verena answered.

A few of the machines walking past gave them curious glances, some muttering something about newcomers or fresh meat.

“Our first stop should be on this side of the pit. Four kilometers down,” Verena said.

Pierce whistled. “Now that’s depth.”

Ilea walked forward, her wings extending out of her armored back to keep her heavy form at least somewhat stable as it fell. Then she stepped off the side.

The others followed.

She felt a few impacts going down, looking up to see that some old machinery and outcrops of rock had been shattered by her legs and back. “Sorry,” she whispered, using her wings to accelerate downward and into the dark.

“We’re close!” Verena shouted some time later.

Ilea extended her wings and turned around in the air, her steel hands and body slamming into the stone wall of the pit. Entire chunks were ripped out as she slowed her descent, most of the work done by her entirely overwhelmed wings.

“It’s here!” Verena shouted somewhere above her.

Ilea left a line of destruction in the stone before she finally just stored her armor and teleported upward. They were in utter darkness. She resummoned it once they were inside the large crevice leading into the stone.

“Are these the Shining Caves?” Pierce asked, looking back into the pit and into the darkness that still went on for an unreasonable distance.

“No, but these tunnels could lead us there,” Verena said. “This was a silver mine… two hundred years ago. They collapsed most of it when they came upon high-level undead.”

“We will cleanse the cursed,” Ilea said, her vibrating voice traveling into the depths.

Detonations boomed somewhere below, dull and far away.

“They’re having fun,” Pierce said.

Ilea increased her weight and walked into the dark mine shaft. She actually fitted. The dwarves who built it must’ve been quite considerate of war machines.

Easier to dig with one of these – for most people, at least, she thought, forming an ashen drill on her right arm.

They came up on a collapsed tunnel about ten minutes later. Ilea prepared her drill and got to work, the sounds reverberating through the vicinity, pebbles and dust falling from above and into the darkness. Only Verena’s flames and the occasional sparks from Pierce illuminated the area, though none of them were particularly bothered by the darkness.

“Another ten meters,” Ilea informed them.

Verena was storing most of the large chunks of stone in her storage item before teleporting away to dump them all in another tunnel.

“Any monsters?” Pierce asked.

“Yep,” Ilea said and displaced one of the waiting creatures next to the woman.

[Cursed Undead Skinner – lvl 410] – [Hostile / Confused]

The creature looked a little like an elongated hyena, its face distinctly dwarven with thin hair clinging to its skin and unkempt fur covering the rest of its body. It screeched, its mouth opening wide. Sharp teeth lined its jaws as a venomous cloud spread outward.

Now that’s a proper monster. Just need you at a few hundred levels higher.

Lightning cracked in the darkness, blue energy burning through the wailing monster as it tried to get to Pierce. It had taken a few steps toward her when a massive steel arm slammed down on its back.

Ilea grabbed the creature and smashed it against the wall a few times, then finished it off by breaking its neck. Or so she thought. In fact, the Skinner continued to slash into her armaments with its sharp claws. It gurgled and spat an acidic substance onto her helmet.

Ilea aimed the undead toward the section she hadn’t dug out yet, then a bright flash of flames and heat burst out. It illuminated the dark tunnel for a second, entirely incinerating both the undead and part of the tunnel wall. A ding resounded.

Pierce coughed, waving away the venomous cloud as her armor flowed out to cover her face. “Ugh… that’s vile. And now I’m poisoned. Great.”

“My child, do not fear the darkness,” the titan said, trying to pat her head.

The Elder dodged away. “If anyone’s a child, it’s you.”

“Then stop whining,” Ilea said, her drill bit spinning once more.

I always wanted to be some kind of titan. Well, no, maybe I didn’t. But now I do.

She checked Pierce’s vitals with her dominion and continued drilling, whistling a tune to herself within the confines of her armored tank.

“We’re about to break through,” she informed the others. “Twenty of those things will come rushing in on us. Maybe make some distance.”

Both Elders vanished, reappearing about twenty meters back.

“Knock knock,” the titan said as it broke through with its drill.

Ilea watched as twenty of the undead Skinners crawled out with impressive speed. They fell on her near instantly, spewing their acid, clouds of venom covering the whole vicinity. She remained calm as her armor was scratched and eaten through, a sphere of flames flashing out a moment later.

Bits and pieces of undead were thrown aside, and as the sphere smoldered, Ilea was surprised to find some had survived. She approached them, lifting her foot above a slowly regenerating undead. It came down with a wet and heavy impact. An unrecognizable mush flowed away from her boot.

Her drill arm came down on another creature. She displaced it back when it tried to avoid the attack. Her weaponized arm connected, the ash ripping the undead apart in less than a second, splattering the walls and Ilea’s armaments with black blood.

She stepped close to the wall on her right, pinning another undead between the wall and her drill, then she made it spin again, grinding the undead away between stone and ash. She healed her armor in the process, walking toward another group of undead rushing toward her from the halls of an ancient tomb.

Ilea made her drill disappear and clenched both her fists, lightning flashing past her as she changed into a slow jog. Her steps made the walls tremble. Dust and debris fell as she alerted more undead further in the complex.

“Come to me,” she said, slamming her fist down on the first unfortunate critter. They were certainly fast and could see well enough in the dark to dodge her slow attacks. But what she had was mass. As Ilea simply stepped to the side, slamming her massive form against the wall, several creatures turned to mush, their bones splintered and heads cracked.

Ilea finished off the ones close to death with her reverse healing. Slamming herself into the other side of the tomb, she nearly stumbled, her control still questionable. The creatures continued to jump on her chest or use their acid, but it was all inconsequential.

She stomped on those close to her legs and displaced those on her chest into her massive hands, squeezing until their bodies were broken chunks of

flesh. As everything around her died, the next group of approaching creatures was riddled by lances of ash.

Ilea jogged toward them and tried to jump, falling onto the group of injured undead with a reverberating crash. Black blood splattered against the walls before she tried to push herself up. She slipped and slammed back down into the mush.

“Brutal,” Pierce said as she walked closer. “Do you need help getting up?”

“I am… the destroyer,” Ilea said with her destroyer voice. “I do not n—”

She slipped again.

“Okay… Help.”

Pierce checked one of the nearby graves. “Not like I could lift you anyway,” she mused. “These are all broken.”

“From the inside,” Verena confirmed as she joined them, her flames illuminating the carnage of Ilea’s rampage.

“Are there more coming?” Pierce asked, another loud *thonk* echoing down the passageway as Ilea slipped for a third time.

She spread a bed of ash below her armor, cleaning both the regenerating metal and the stone floor. Finally, with a bit of a better grip, she slowly moved her right knee while pushing herself up with both arms. Her movement stopped there, however.

“You’re stuck,” Pierce commented.

“No,” she replied, pushing her knee farther up as she tried to get the foot under herself. After a few moments, she just slammed it into the ground for leverage and pushed herself forward. As her left hand crashed through four empty graves, she stumbled her way up, managing to dig her right hand into the ceiling. The support allowed for enough counterweight to let her lift her left leg, landing on both feet.

“Beauty. And grace,” the deep voice thundered as pieces of rock fell from the ceiling and the walls.

Pierce clapped. “What will you do if there aren’t conveniently placed walls all around you?”

“One step at a time,” Ilea replied. “And no, I think if there were any more undead nearby, they’d be here by now.”

“We pretty much just go down from here,” Verena said.

Ilea headed back the way they'd come, her ashen limbs shooting upward and cutting into the ceiling. More of the tunnel collapsed, sealing the entrance once more. "We were never here."

They continued through the maze of the tomb, not finding any more creatures until they came out into a spacious hall. It was dimly lit by ancient magical lights; most of them were out, but a few still cast a green glow.

Dozens of sarcophagi lined the walls. At the back of the hall stood a large stone table covered in runes, with a dust-covered skeleton lying on top and bones on the floor on either side. In front of the table floated a humanoid being radiating death and rot. Thin strips of skin still clung to its short, frail body, most of it covered with a tattered black robe. It wielded an obsidian staff and turned when the group entered its domain.

As Ilea watched the being through her domain, it raised its staff. A pulse of mana rushed out, entering the sarcophagi all around them.

[Priest of the Blight Chosen – lvl ???] – [Undead]

"It's just above six hundred," Ilea said. "I suggest you two be careful."

"More dangerous things in the graves," Verena informed them, her body clad in flames as she jumped back, two burning black axes appearing in her hands.

Lightning flashed around Pierce, and a large bolt rushed toward the robed figure, but it only impacted a shield of green energy. "Ah, of course. Always with these pure mages," she murmured, then vanished.

Ilea kept a loose eye on them through her dominion. Just as she ran at the priest, a roar came from the side. Two graves that had just opened up revealed a few Skinners crawling out, just before the wall behind them exploded into the hall.

A massive humanoid being covered in rotten flesh and sickly skin barreled through the debris. It probably weighed about as much as Ilea with all of that fat. Below, however, strained muscles were visible.

A tank, just like me, Ilea thought with a grin, reverse healing the dozens of Skinners coming from the many sarcophagi.

Pierce flashed in and out of existence around the Priest, lightning clashing with death magic shields and beams. Verena was running through the hordes of Skinners with her axes and flames, cutting through both flesh and stone.

“Gods, you’re disgusting,” Ilea’s deep voice bellowed, and then she charged at the massive being.

The creature did the same, its eyes milky and unfocused.

[Undead Flesh Titan – lvl ???] – [Heavy]

Yeah, I noticed, Ilea thought as her armored form crashed into the mountain of flesh and muscle.

Both of them were brought to an abrupt halt, their feet looking for leverage. Ilea sent a heavy strike into the monster’s side. Flesh wobbled with the impact, but the monster didn’t react at all, instead trying to grab her arm with both hands.

It coughed and retched, and a mass of steaming flesh puked up from its mouth to cover Ilea’s armored helmet and chest. A sizzling noise came from the liquid as it ate through the steel at an alarming rate.

She healed against it, using her ash to wipe off what she could, her limbs cutting through the monster’s flesh and muscle to no reaction. She went for the head and managed to rip it off with three quick slashes, but the thing kept moving.

The Flesh Titan held tight to her arm before its whole body started to bloat. The cuts on its flesh were already knitting themselves back together, and a part of its head had regenerated, too. Ilea could feel a massive amount of mana build within the level eight hundred creature, and she ripped her hand free with a last-ditch effort before she covered her chest and helmet with her arms.

The sound that followed was downright revolting. A deep squelch. Blood, guts, and flesh exploded outward, splattering against everything in a near ten-meter radius. The undead nearby were entirely covered, screeching as their bodies dissolved in the steaming piles of disgusting fat. Even the stone floor itself dissolved.

Ilea’s steel arms were gone, revealing her real ones below, and two layers of her ash had been eaten through as well. Her steel chest had been reduced to less than half, her helmet just barely covering her face at this point. She could feel herself retch at the smell. What she perceived with her dominion was more than enough.

Let’s not train Flesh Magic Resistance with this guy. She immediately questioned that decision before the smell put her off once more. *You could*

just remove your nose and close your eyes… No. No, let's just not.

Most of the monster's body was gone, its skeletal legs barely keeping the fleshy remains aloft, but it was regenerating at an alarming speed.

"My turn," Ilea said.

A sphere of heat flashed out, and whatever other creatures had remained around them were now entirely gone. Yet, still, Ilea's enemy stood before her. Its rib cage was all that remained, bone and flesh quickly reappearing as its magic kept it alive.

She formed more heat within herself and extended a few ashen limbs toward the remains. Her armor healed at a slower pace than the undead, but in the end, only one of them would remain.

Embered Heart flashed out in a cone, stripping away the undying flesh. She raised her armored boot and brought it down on the scorched rib cage. Cracks appeared on the first strike. On the second, it crumbled entirely. Ilea kept on stomping, occasionally sending another blast of heat onto the small crater, until she finally received the notification.

'ding' You have defeated [Undead Flesh Titan – lvl 803]

A few more messages came up, but she ignored them for now. She turned to the others, her steel still repairing itself with the help of her healing. The two Elders had managed to reduce the number of Skinners somewhat, but more were coming.

Ilea watched the Priest, seeing it continue to send pulses of magic into various nearby graves. *Those are empty…* Even as she had the thought, new Skinners formed from mana itself.

"We have to kill the source," she said, walking toward the creature. It turned and sent a beam of purple death magic her way, but the attack failed to stop her monstrous form.

Ilea let the death beam burn into her armaments until her fist came down on the Priest. A thick magical shield flared into being, lighting up the surroundings.

Let's get rid of that, shall we?

She formed a dozen ashen limbs, all of them slashing into the shield. As Tempered Seal burned into the magic, white flames spread across it. The shield soon cracked, and she lashed out to grab the undead.

Her massive hand closed around its frail chest. She squished it and used her other hand to rip off its head. Neither managed to kill the being, but the summoning of more Skinners ceased.

Pierce's armor was battered, and part of her face had been melted away by the Skinners' acid, but her lightning still lit up the room as she flew by and scorched the undead running after her.

Verena looked fine, her body glowing with power in Ilea's dominion, her wounds constantly regenerating as she slashed and cut into the horde of beasts.

"Can I get a beam?!" Pierce shouted, flying past Ilea's shoulder with a dozen monsters on her toes.

A moment later, only ash remained after a cone of flames enveloped them, and the woman landed on Ilea's shoulder.

"That was close. Thanks."

"You're welcome," the titan boomed. "Now bring me more."

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FORTY-EIGHT

Undying

As Pierce laughed and jumped off Ilea's metal shoulder, Ilea displaced a nearby Skinner into her open palm, squishing it with her massive steel fingers. She threw the remains to the side, like a wrung-out rag.

"Is she alright?"

Verena's vitals seemed to be doing alright according to her dominion-enhanced healing, but she was taking a lot of hits, and the acid was constantly melting her skin. Most of her clothes were gone too, her body covered primarily in blood and flames.

"She's just getting started," Pierce said, appearing on a nearby chunk of rubble.

Ilea kept an eye on the fighting Elder but decided not to interfere. She instead moved her attention back to the Priest. It was slowly reforming its missing head and injured torso, but a heavy steel fist soon interrupted the process.

Ilea knelt down on one knee and just kept punching, each hit sending tremors through the ground. Cracks formed, and stone was shattered. The undead was first turned into mush and then into powder, its remains mixing with the general debris. Only then did Ilea receive a notification.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Priest of the Blight Chosen – lvl 608]

She stood up and checked her arm, but the steel was neither dented nor scratched from the intense pummeling.

“You’re already starting to move a little less awkwardly,” Pierce said from the side, her armor back to normal as well.

“It feels… right,” the titan answered, her first raised.

Pierce laughed and kept on fighting.

Ilea quickly checked the message she had received.

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 488 – 1 stat point awarded

One level done, twelve to go. Need to find more of those fat Titans.

Verena sank her axe into the last of the still-moving creatures, cutting it apart with eighteen more strikes until only a few pieces remained. She looked up, runes glowing on her burning, blood-covered body, a crazed grin on her face.

Doesn’t seem fair to comment on that after my own performance, Ilea thought as she approached the woman.

“Give her a moment,” Pierce said.

Verena turned and crouched. She looked at Ilea with hungry eyes, her axes at the ready.

“Friend,” Ilea said, spreading her arms wide.

The woman looked confused and hesitated. Steaming black blood dripped from her body, most of it burning away.

“Friend?” she asked herself, looking at the floor before she glanced at her axes. “Yes,” she added with a smile. “Friend.”

The others waited until Verena had cleaned herself with her flames, donning a fresh hide skirt and a steel top when she was done.

“Ahh, that was good.”

“Got a level too,” Pierce said. “It’s so easy with this machine here to take out the most dangerous foes.”

Ilea grunted with a deep voice. She gestured to the others and continued toward the exit.

* * *

The tomb continued down into the depths, open sarcophagi lining the many corridors and halls, few of them holding any undead. Most seemed to have left their graves during the earlier battle. As they descended down damp stairwells and dark shafts, the group soon started to hear noises again.

“Far enough away from the previous fight,” Verena said.

“Nothing in my sphere,” Ilea said.

They continued toward the noise for another ten minutes, Ilea’s armaments preventing them from moving particularly fast through the often cramped tunnels. She did feel like she was getting better at avoiding the ceiling and graves, though, only damaging every fourth one or so.

Finally, Ilea stopped the others with a gesture as she started to see groups of undead creatures at the edge of her dominion. “More spacious area ahead. Several Flesh Titans,” she informed them with floating ash, unable to make her voice changer particularly quiet. She took a few steps. “Priests, too. And… something else. Looks more dangerous than any of the others.”

The Elders followed in silence.

“Cavern leads away,” Ilea continued, creating a rough copy of the tunnel layout with floating ash. She lit embers where the three of them were located and then where the cavern seemed to lead out of the tomb.

“You’ll want to fight them,” Pierce said.

“Of course,” Ilea said after appearing on top of her armor. “But it might be too dangerous for you two. There are eight Flesh Titans alone, and I’m pretty sure the Priests can heal the others with their death magic. Oh… one of the large ones just turned our way.”

“We’ll approach slowly once you’ve started. And we’ll get out of there if they’re too dangerous.”

“I’ll send you a warning if there’s mind magic at play that could take you out,” Ilea said, looking at Pierce. “Let’s get working, then,” she added with a smirk, vanishing back into her armaments.

“Go get them, titan,” Pierce said, a wide grin on her face.

“Don’t mind if I do,” the titan boomed, starting toward the open hall full of undead.

* * *

Magical lamps on the ceiling lit Ilea's way before the tunnel opened up into a spacious natural cave. The ground was paved with stone, and a temple-like structure had been built into the other side of the cavern.

She could see nearly a hundred Skinners, eight Titans, and a few Priests, most of them barely moving around. The new variant she could see had thin, elongated bodies and were as tall as her armaments. Their frail arms ended in clawed hands, and they wore tattered cloaks that hid their faces, their outlines suggesting a barely recognizable mush of flesh below.

Ilea came out into the open, moving past a few decrepit pillars and onto a balcony that overlooked the cave, as the first rows of undead turned her way, some already moving into a sprint. Her legs smashed through the ancient stone railings without resistance.

The titan spread her arms for the short flight, one foot landing on an unfortunate Skinner, whose body exploded outward with a wet sound. Landing in a crouch, she stood up slowly, a rifle appearing in her hands as she aimed at the approaching horde.

"Your reckoning has come," her voice vibrated.

A bright beam of flames cut into and through the mass of flesh, dozens of creatures falling apart, their limbs lost or bodies halved. The beam ended in one of the shuffling Titans, opening a deep gash that spewed boiling fluids onto a group of undead and the shield of a Priest.

Ilea made her weapon disappear when she saw one of the tall, thin beings run at her, faster than anything its size had any right to be. *Time magic*, she saw, coupled with a spell that restricted her teleports. It would take some time to break through it, but she didn't deem it a particularly difficult puzzle.

As its massive claws cut into her cumbersome armor, digging several centimeters into her steel, Ilea identified a few familiar schools of magic in the creature's attack.

Soul and… devour. She smiled. *This might actually get interesting.*

[Devourer – lvl ????] – [Undead]

As the horde closed in, she tried to punch the creature, but it simply moved aside with a fluid motion.

Near level one thousand. Should be manageable, then.

Ash formed all around her. Ilea set it alight with Flame of Creation, sacrificing nearly twenty thousand health to empower the storm before she made it move out toward the undead horde. She held up her arm to block the clawed hands of the Devourer, and though its soul magic seeped through her armor, the devour magic was mostly blocked.

The creatures screeched as the flames reached them, a chunk of them incinerated by the cone of flames that followed the burning ash. Ilea watched a second Devourer run right around the carnage before it dug its claws into her back. A third one joined half a second later.

"You will feel my wrath," she said.

Three spells at once. A reasonable puzzle. And only one of them is a four-mark.

Burning ash spread out, the large undead darting back to avoid the floating element. Ilea crossed her arms when two Flesh Titans reached her, their bodies already showing burns as their skin started to bulge.

Why don't you three come closer? she thought, focusing on their frameworks for a second and then displacing the waiting Devourers in front of her. As her ashen limbs lashed out to keep them in place, the Titans' steaming flesh exploded.

Ilea sacrificed another chunk of her recovered health and cast Embered Heart, reducing the Titans to scorched bones, though new flesh was already forming around their skeletons. The Devourers reeled back, their bodies burnt and melted but quickly recovering, much like the Titans. She could see death magic in the air.

The Priests…

A sphere of flame streaked into the cave and exploded among the largest cluster of undead clerics. Their shields flashed, and the death magic ceased. As their attention shifted to the unknown beings, lightning bolts hissed toward them. Their staffs raised, the Priests summoned more Skinners, a few of the creatures already running toward the temple-like structure on the far side of the cavern.

Ilea switched gears, her reconstruction reversed and pushed to the limit. She topped off her health and stopped healing herself. The armaments would hold out for a little while, even without her support. She focused her destructive mana on the high-level creatures around her, staying close to the regenerating Flesh Titans. The flesh bombs were beneficial if anything.

As she watched all the monsters approach, her body froze up. Her lips quivered, and she felt suggestive mind magic coming from the three beings. *Move,* she willed her body, pushing against the combined effort to overwhelm her. The mind magic wasn't guided or delicate, just a straight bombardment that suggested the enemy was terrifying.

It worked for a few seconds. As the approaching Titans puked their steaming flesh onto her armor, the three Devourers dug into her arms and back. Parts of her steel limbs fell to the ground, the first claw on her back biting into her mantle. She felt the deeply unsettling touch of soul magic, a bit of her health devoured at the same time.

Ilea closed her eyes. *I should flee. I should figure out their spells and leave… get the others and…*

She gazed at the Flesh Titans, their towering forms looking entirely too large. Their claws were cutting through her mantle now, more pieces of her armor disappearing, her steel chest and head melting away under the piles of burning flesh.

She could feel her heart beating.

"No," she forced herself to say, the deep sound vibrating through the damaged unit in her side.

A sphere of heat flared out, all the flesh on her burning away. Flame-covered ashen limbs emerged from her back, steel regenerating as the undead were cut apart, each of their strikes answered with five of her own. Ilea's weight was at its maximum, and the next three uses of Embered Heart killed the five Titans closest to her.

Her armor was almost completely shredded, her soul taking more damage. When her right arm had recovered to a usable degree, she summoned her rifle and aimed at the Devourer in front of her, sending her spell into the Wyrm's eye. The creature dodged out of the way, a field of space magic swallowing the glowing energy before it reappeared next to the undead, slicing its body in half from its waist up.

She found the sequence and transferred out of her armaments, her weight decreasing once more. Ilea displaced herself behind the four-mark Devourer and sent a charged Archon Strike into its spine. It wailed as the arcane magic wracked through its body. Her burning, ashen limbs cut into all three Devourers, more ash constantly forming and covering them in the Flame of Creation. Ilea's heat generation slowed down as her movements sped up.

“I’m not afraid,” she said, still feeling the heavy pressure of their magic. “You’re just the next horrors I’ll rip apart.”

Ilea dodged backward, each evasion allowing her to avoid their devastating soul magic. She sent a cone of heat forward, then spread her wings and flew upward. The Devourers floated after her, following her with quick, time magic-enhanced movements. The one she had split apart knitted itself back together.

Ilea created a few dozen spears, filling them with the remaining heat within her, and sent them down toward the Priests and Skinners. The sound of their impacts filled the air as she dodged the claws that came for her. A few strikes hit home, biting into her mantle and damaging her soul.

You’re just giving me more resistances, she thought, her mind now pushing back against the pressure.

The four beings flew through the cavern with increasing speed, but Ilea got in more hits with each passing second. Her flames and reverse healing, coupled with her high-level mana intrusion, quickly increased her damage, slowing and overwhelming their regeneration and breaking down their resistance against intrusion.

Ilea kept a perceptive inner eye on her soul as she flew through the time-enhanced strikes, her precognition and dominion allowing her to avoid most of the attacks now that she was speeding up bit by bit. Body of the Valkyrie reduced not only their physical damage but also all of their magic. Despite the Devourers’ magical affinity, time happened to be in her favor.

She appeared behind the lowest-level one, striking its spine six times before it could turn. Magic surged up and through its battered body. As Ilea transferred past the Devourers’ teleportation-blocking spells and appeared behind the next of them, she saw the first Devourer fall, slapping to the ground fifteen meters away.

No notification, she thought, but immediately refocused on the others. Their mind magic turned out to be a welcome source of mana; Ilea wasn’t willing to risk more soul magic damage to use her Sentinel Core absorption against their claw strikes.

She struck them dozens of times, her magic flashing time and time again until the second one fell to her white flames, leaving only the four-mark in front of her.

She sped up and teleported past its claws, her fists striking its chest with expanding magic explosions. Tempered Seal followed as her limbs cut into

its arms, pushing them aside as it tried to attack. She moved her wings, holding onto its hood and swinging around its head.

Stable and in the air, she struck down, digging her hand into its neck before releasing Embered Heart. The blast incinerated part of its head and spread out its torso. Smoldering flesh remained within, slowly knitting itself back together.

The whole creature was covered in white flames as Ilea's ash moved in. She grabbed onto two strips of its remaining flesh and pushed her ashen boot down, ripping the whole thing into three pieces. Again, no message. This time, she noticed a dull magical connection flickering out, its source somewhere within the stone temple.

She landed amongst the Devourers' corpses, pushing them together before she sent another blast of Embered Heart onto them. This time, they were all entirely incinerated. The remaining Priests and Skinners had moved closer to the temple, their undead bodies shredded by ashen limbs in mere seconds.

Ilea ignored the two slow-moving Titans for now, their legs gone as they crawled toward her. Instead, she headed for the temple. Her mark on Verena showed her higher up in the catacombs, likely fighting her way back with Pierce while being chased by Skinners. She had yet to call for help, so Ilea stayed where she was.

Inside the stone structure, Ilea found an expansive hall with rotted wooden benches and chairs. A single ceremonially placed sarcophagus stood on a central altar. It was empty. She ignored that one for now and checked the three closed sarcophagi. Bones rested within, powerful death magic forming close to their rib cages.

Ilea displaced the remains out into the open, raised her hand above the pile, and released Embered Heart.

'ding' You have defeated [Devourer – lvl 928]
'ding' You have defeated [Devourer – lvl 893]
'ding' You have defeated [Devourer – lvl 1020]

More messages dinged in her mind, a grin spreading across her face when she realized that they weren't stopping. She checked the room again, a little apprehensive of the empty sarcophagus, but neither Eternal Huntress

nor her dominion picked anything up. The remaining Titans were the only sources of magic in the vicinity.

She cracked her neck and reappeared outside. Her armaments looked battered. The left arm was gone entirely, most of the chest had melted away, and the head had been cut apart by hundreds of sharp incisions. It was remarkable that the thing was still standing. She transferred herself inside and started repairing it, heat and mana beginning to flow through the living armor as her eyes locked onto the Titans.

Her weight increased, and her vision was cut off when the steel of her helmet regenerated. *A shame you can't seem to repair your legs*, she thought, walking toward the creatures. *Let's finish this.*

* * *

Ilea thundered through the tomb, each step sending tremors through the walls until she broke through into a broader room.

Verena stood on a mound of undead corpses, covered in black blood. Pierce was lying nearby, her breathing ragged and the occasional spark of lightning coursing over her body. Her armor had been ripped to shreds.

"Well done," Ilea said before realizing that the Elders couldn't hear her. She transferred out of the armaments and sighed. "Already broken…"

She raised the heavy steel arm and looked at the entirely smooth metal surface where the voice module had once been.

At least the weakness is gone.

"Do we flee?" Pierce asked, turning her head slightly toward the massive chunk of steel.

"No. But I do need to take a break," Ilea said, teleporting onto the armaments' shoulder before she summoned herself a bottle of celebratory ale.

Because I just hit five hundred for the third time.

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FORTY-NINE

Fire

"Oh, I see. Congratulations," Pierce said. "Couldn't be happier for that to happen inside this welcoming tomb."

Ilea rolled her eyes and turned off her Pierce perception.

'ding' The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 508 – 5 stat points awarded
…
'ding' The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 510 – 5 stat points awarded – 1 Core Skill point awarded
'ding' The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 506 – 5 stat points awarded
…
'ding' The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 508 – 5 stat points awarded
'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 489 – 1 stat point awarded

…
'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 500 – 1 stat point awarded – 1 Core Skill point awarded

'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9
'ding' Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7
'ding' Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6

'ding' Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 8

…
‘ding’ Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9
‘ding’ Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6
‘ding’ Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7

‘ding’ Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 14
…
‘ding’ Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 17
‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 22
‘ding’ Monstrous reaches lvl 5
‘ding’ Soul Perception reaches lvl 11
‘ding’ Spear of Ash reaches lvl 18
‘ding’ Spear of Ash reaches lvl 19
‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 29
‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 30
‘ding’ Devour Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7
‘ding’ Devour Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8
‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 18
‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15
‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16

Show me the options.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class evolution: The Faen Valkyrie becomes The Spirit Monarch. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

Rule and conquer. Leveled six third-Class skills to the end of the third tier. Has killed 5,000 spirits while alone. Has killed ten or more spirits at twice or more their own level. Has fought and killed a four-mark spirit. Has killed ten four-mark beings while alone. Has traveled to three or more realms. Has unlocked the Soul Perception skill. Has the Soul Magic Resistance skill in the second tier. Has the Deviant of Humanity skill in the third tier. Has the Meditation skill in the third tier. Has a third Class at level 500.

A being of unquestioned authority, the Monarch has perfect control over the spirits she summons. She wields powerful soul magic to both destroy and rule. No army will stand in her way, no foe shall resist her hordes of untiring specters. No longer human, the Monarch chooses her path, forging ahead through the unknown and into realms that none of her former kind have ever reached. Accept the crown, and have existence bow to your greatness.

Would you like to evolve your Class [The Faen Valkyrie] to [The Spirit Monarch]?

"What are the options?" Pierce asked, standing next to her armaments.

"Get out of here, woman, or I'll smear you across the ceiling. This is a private moment," Ilea hissed.

"I'm just int—" Pierce began when Verena appeared and dragged her away.

Ilea shook her head and refocused.

Spirit summoner. The requirements are pretty high, but I think I prefer fighting myself. Plus, I already have my ashen copies.

'ding' Requirements met for Class evolution: The Faen Valkyrie becomes The Child of the Deep. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

Embrace the unknown. Leveled six third-Class skills to the end of the third tier. Has met a Flesh-Stricken Leviathan and retained their sanity, flesh, and brain. Has eaten the flesh of countless creatures. Has at least five songs written about her. Has traveled beyond the atmosphere. Has seen the depths. Has communed with a creature once deemed a deity. Has at least 100 beings who believe them to be a deity. Has the Deviant of Humanity skill in the third tier. Has the Harmony of the Drowned skill. Has the Veteran skill at the end of the third tier. Has the Blood Manipulation Resistance at the end of the second tier. Has the Mental Resistance skill in the third tier. Has killed ten four-mark beings while alone. Has a third Class at level 500.

The depths are calling. Your first step on the path of divinity, a creature sung about in myths and legends. Feared and revered, you have traveled the lands, striking the hearts of man and beast alike. Return to the waters from whence you came to find true understanding of all that lies in the hazed shroud. Lay down your flesh and skin to become more. The path to evolution and greatness will grant you power beyond all you comprehend. Space and minds will bend to your will, fear itself the companion you sought to find. Open your eyes.

Would you like to evolve your Class [The Faen Valkyrie] to [The Child of the Deep]?

Ilea felt each hair on her body stand up. The image of an all-seeing eye flashed before her. She felt small and meaningless, shuddering at the sensation before she calmed herself with healing and meditation. She shoved the sensations away and read through the next option.

'ding' Requirements met for Class evolution: The Faen Valkyrie becomes The Harbinger of Cake. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

Spread joy and sugar. Leveled six third-Class skills to the end of the second tier. Has eaten five cakes in one sitting. Has used cakes to bribe people. Is the primary owner of at least ten pastry shops. Has traveled through realms in an effort to find more variety in their cake journey. Has weighed one ton or more, but was not bothered by such circumstances. At all. Has turned their enemies into batter. Has enjoyed highly poisonous pastries. Has felt aroused by the experience of eating cake. Has the Deviant of Humanity skill in the third tier. Has the Poison Resistance skill in the third tier. Has killed three four-mark beings while alone. Has a third Class above level 500.

The deceiver. Cake is the true meaning of life, the answer so obvious any child would understand. And yet it takes years of training and dedication to reach the devotion of a true harbinger. She lures her enemies with the promise of sugar, to see them dying in their own unworthy vomit. Her blood is poisoned and her favorite secret ingredient. To her friends, she is

the joyous pastry lover; to her enemies, she is the unknown bringer of death. All is cake, all is batter. Bake the living flesh. Into delicious cake!

Would you like to evolve your Class [The Faen Valkyrie] to [The Harbinger of Cake]?

Ilea sighed. *I deny these accusations. And that certainly took a dark turn. Helena would be delighted to hear about this Class, though.*

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class evolution: The Faen Valkyrie becomes The Dragonforged Flame. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

Unparalleled. Leveled six third-Class skills to the end of the third tier. Has killed 5,000 beings with the Flame of Creation. Has fought an adult dragon and survived. Has burned an adult dragon with the Flame of Creation. Has escaped an adult dragon’s wrath. For now. Has the Heat Resistance skill in the third tier. Has incinerated beings of fire. Has the Deviant of Humanity skill in the third tier. Has the Veteran skill at the end of the third tier. Has killed ten four-mark beings while alone. Has a third Class at level 500.

You are the flame of creation. A being of heat and fire, unquestioned in her nature, unparalleled in her control. Entire nations will burn at your will, should you wish for such an outcome. The white flame has no equal, her existence an affront to the dragons themselves, a being once human that dares to defy their rule. In time, they too will learn to fear her. For she is all-consuming. A primal fire to strip away the very fabric of reality and mana itself. Become what shall be your path henceforth, Lilith the undying.

Would you like to evolve your Class [The Faen Valkyrie] to [The Dragonforged Flame]?

She smiled. *Hmm… yes. This one sounds… acceptable.*

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class evolution: The Faen Valkyrie becomes The Void Lord of Ravenhall. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

The unseen protector. Leveled six third-Class skills to the end of the third tier. Has the Void Magic Resistance skill in the third tier. Has the Space Awareness skill in the third tier. Has killed a four-mark being of void. Is known as Lilith to at least 100,000 beings. Has killed 1,000 beings of void. Has the Deviant of Humanity skill in the third tier. Has killed ten four-mark beings while alone. Has the Meditation skill in the third tier. Has met a true Fae. Has a third Class at level 500.

Death unseen. You are the true Shadow of Ravenhall, your chosen name both strength in the hearts of your allies and a deterrent to the enemies of your home. Your plans for the future are vast. Ripples already travel through the lands of your kind, soon surely turned to waves as your influence and power shape the future of all you choose to protect and those you will choose to rid from this realm. A being of space and void, not seen or felt, but all-seeing nonetheless. The fabric is yours to wield and bend; all those who dare to stand in your way will vanish without a trace. Be wise, Void Lord, for you will be the shield of man.

Would you like to evolve your Class [The Faen Valkyrie] to [The Void Lord of Ravenhall]?

Hmmmm. This one sounds pretty good, too. The ‘can’t be seen or felt’ part is a little spooky, but a fully void- and space-focused class is bound to be mega powerful.

Ilea bounced between the Dragonforged Flame and Void Lord evolutions before she continued reading.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class evolution: The Faen Valkyrie becomes The Primordial Arbiter. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

The patron of immortals. Leveled six third-Class skills to the end of the third tier. Has killed ten four-mark beings while alone. Has befriended and learned from the Baron of Violence. Has befriended and learned

from the Endless Meadow. Has befriended and learned from an Enavurin. Has befriended and learned from an adult Trakorov. Has befriended and learned from a true Ice Elemental. Has saved three or more species from extinction. Has saved the life of a Lich more than twice their own level. Has the Veteran skill at the end of the third tier. Has ten resistances in the third tier. Has the Space Awareness skill at the end of the third tier. Has the Flare of Creation skill at the end of the third tier. Has mastered two paths of magic seen by some as contradictory. Has the Deviant of Humanity skill in the third tier. Has a third Class at level 500.

An unexpected ally. Beings far beyond your understanding, power, and magic have found your genuine curiosity and unusual nature noteworthy. The Arbiter is neither follower nor ruler, but equal to those she deems her allies. She has approached and learned from beings most of her kind would consider horrors or simply monsters of incomprehensible power. Not as boundless sources of knowledge, but companions on her journey did she treat these primal beings of ancient times. Some she calls her friends, a sentiment perhaps lost or never known to those living at the apex of existence. She remains human at her very core, the blood in her veins and the magic flowing through her both touched by the very beings she has met on her travels. A master of the fabric like none her kind had ever seen. An immortal, respected by the gods of old. Her will shall bend reality itself, the magic of her enemies but fuel to her power, the flame of creation permeating her very soul and magic. Your ancient peers will watch with pride as, soon, they welcome you into their ranks of power. Go forth, Arbiter.

Would you like to evolve your Class [The Faen Valkyrie] to [The Primordial Arbiter]?

Ilea whistled, leaning back as she nearly chose the change immediately.

Holy shit, that's a chonker! Still human, space magic upgrades, magic absorption? And the flame of creation. Fuck dragons.

She knew it was more than that. The descriptions reminded her of her journey, of all the strange and interesting beings she'd met on the way. This Class felt like a culmination of all that.

She refocused and read through the last option.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class evolution: The Faen Valkyrie becomes The Trakoborn. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

The heated. Leveled six third-Class skills to the end of the third tier. Has befriended and trained with a Trakorov. Has found great joy in lava baths. Has stored enough heat within herself to melt stone. Has ten resistances in the third tier. Has weighed over a ton while having a size of less than two cubic meters. Has incinerated 5,000 monsters. Has the Gourmet skill. Has the Monster Hunter skill in the third tier. Has the Deviant of Humanity skill in the third tier. Has killed ten four-mark beings while alone. Has a third Class at level 500.

Trembling steps of absolute destruction, the Trakoborn is a giant compared to their previous form. Their skin is hardened stone, their blood is lava. All is set ablaze by their very presence. Capable of great destruction, the Trakoborn would rather choose to settle deep within the mantle of the world, sleep and rest the highest forms of bliss, only topped by scorched and crispy meat from beings that wandered into her domain. In time, they will grow until a new lair must be chosen, her fires heating up until they break the very laws of reality. Slumber and eat, for life is joy.

Would you like to evolve your Class [The Faen Valkyrie] to [The Trakoborn]?

Not like I expected anything different.

Ilea didn’t have to think for long. It was between the Dragonforged Flame and the Primordial Arbiter, and while the former seemed like a strong upgrade in terms of her magic and power, the choice felt obvious. She wasn’t here because she had evaded and survived an encounter with a dragon or because she’d seen some ancient horror in the depths of the ocean. All the beings that she’d met, befriended, fought, and trained with – they were what had led her here.

Violence to show me space magic. And the Meadow to teach me.

Let’s see how things will change.

‘ding’ Class change: The Faen Valkyrie becomes The Primordial Arbiter

The Primordial Arbiter
Vitality +60
Intelligence +20
Wisdom +50
Space Magic is improved by 300%
Resilience is increased by 500%
Body Enhancement Magic is improved by 100%
Flesh Magic is improved by 100%
Healing Magic is improved by 100%
Mind Magic is improved by 100%
Ice Magic is improved by 100%
Lava Magic is improved by 100%
Earth Magic is improved by 100%
Your Soul has been strengthened by the Flame of Creation

"What the fuck is happening?" Ilea murmured. Her body started heating up, white flames moving over her skin. She could see herself light up within her dominion, and her soul perception showed white fires touching her very essence.

Skills changed by The Primordial Arbiter

[Phaseshift] becomes [Primordial Shift]
Active – Primordial Shift – 3rd lvl 30
Expending a large amount of mana and health, you can temporarily shift the matter of your flesh itself. Absorb a part of all magic that touches you, depending on your understanding and resistance. All regeneration and healing is doubled in this state. Your movements are impaired as your very form is rejected by the laws of reality that surround you.
2nd stage: Resilience bonuses from skills are doubled when entering the Primordial Shift. During the shift, you cannot be moved by anything but your will. Your weight increases tenfold while this spell is active.
3rd stage: The Flame of Creation wills itself into existence, your control and its power increasing dramatically while Primordial Shift is active.
Category: Space Magic – Flesh Magic – Healing Magic

The matter of my flesh? I'm not sure I like the sound of that…

And the whole passing through barrier thing is gone from the first tier, too. Though the absorption coupled with the new doubled healing and regeneration while using the skill… that kind of changes it to something else entirely.

Coupled with the weight increase and the addition that I can't be moved, it feels more like a direct tanking and regeneration skill rather than its previous use of dodging and avoiding. Oh… and I can use the Flame of Creation now while the skill is active? I see… I'll have to try that out.

She could feel heat still growing within her, resisting and storing the power still coming from her evolution.

[Flare of Creation] becomes [Fires of Creation]
Active – Fires of Creation – 3rd lvl 30
Let the fires erupt, burning away your health in exchange for devastating power. All of your spells and your body are infused with the Fires of Creation, if you so choose, dealing lingering damage to health, mana, and magical constructs. You are immune to stunning, fear, and shout abilities. Your resilience is increased by 75% [975%].
2nd stage: The pale flame settles within your core. The Fires of Creation now affect enemy health regeneration. This effect is higher for areas directly touched by the Fires of Creation.
3rd stage: Your experience with Fires of Creation allows you to infuse your magical constructs with its effects. For each level in the third tier, the skill's upkeep is reduced by a static 25 [750] points of health per second, and you may sacrifice an additional static 250 [7,500] points of health per second to enhance the skill's effects.
Category: Aura – Body Enhancement – Space Magic

What's the change?

Wait… "All of your spells"? All spells? Not just those connected to my body? So any of my ash abilities, all of my ranged attacks… all of it? And it got cheaper to use, too… kind of.

Ilea knew that a cost reduction of seven hundred and fifty health per second should've made the skill entirely free to use, but she assumed the base cost had just shot up to infinity.

Especially with the increased health I can sacrifice if I want to. This change just infused everything I have with fire. Even more so than it already

was.

[Displacement] becomes [Fabric Tear]
Active – Fabric Tear – 3rd lvl 30
Shift space to your will, making objects or people appear somewhere else.
2nd stage: Magical constructs are now affected by Fabric Tear. You may change the orientation of the objects you displace.
3rd stage: You may choose two flat areas and connect them through space. When marking an area, it has to be within the range of Fabric Tear. Areas have to be connected within one minute of activating the spell and cannot be farther apart than a static ten kilometers. Three sets of connections can be upheld at a time with exponential costs.
Category: Space Magic

The limit on how many objects I can teleport at once is straight up gone… so I can just move as many things as I want now? And the cooldown for the third tier is gone, too! Which means I can just use them constantly – and I don't have just one set anymore, but three? Remove the limiters!

Ilea laughed, checking to see if her hair had turned white. It hadn't, but she supposed the white flames clinging to her body counted to an extent.

This is going to take a lot of getting used to in a fight… but that just increased my survivability tenfold. Or something like that. Holy shit.

What else has changed?

[Space Shift] becomes [Reality Warp]
Passive – Reality Warp – 3rd lvl 30
Space contorts more easily for you, allowing you to unravel its mysteries. Teleportation abilities can be used again three times as fast, and you can travel ten times as far. You notice fissures between realms at a distance of 50 [200] kilometers. This distance may vary depending on the size and extent of the fissure.
2nd stage: Prevent enemy teleportation spells within a sphere around you with a radius of 50 meters. You cannot teleport while this skill is active.
3rd stage: Your understanding of space magic grows. You learn to latch on to ongoing teleportation spells with your own teleportation abilities.

Long-range and channeled teleportation spells have their range doubled, and their cooldown and cost are reduced by half.
Category: Space Magic

Three times as fast instead of a percentage… that's kind of a shame, but it's still better than before. The teleport interruption from the second tier is an aura thing now, affecting everyone in it instead of just one enemy. My aura isn't quite as impressive as Audur's yet, but with this and my reverse healing, I'm certainly building to something impressive.

And what's that about noticing fissures? Is that something like what Scipio talked about? Like noticing fissures to other realms?

The heat now seemed to peak, burning steadily as the flames continued to form.

[Body of the Valkyrie] becomes [Primordial Flesh]
Passive – Primordial Flesh – 3rd lvl 30
The flame of creation flows through your veins, increasing your resilience by 50% [700%]. Increases your physical damage resistance by 12% [168%]. Increases your magic damage resistance by 12% [168%]. You will no longer be fazed by heavy damage or powerful sources of light and sound. Your natural regeneration can heal any injury.
2nd stage: Your body has withstood incredible damage, endured the hardships of battle. The fires flowing through you have hardened your bones and muscles. Your health is increased by 20% [280%].
3rd stage: Your ability to adapt to your enemy grows. Continued battle against the same foe increases damage reduction against its attacks by 2% [28%] per minute to a maximum of a static 50%. Should you reach one point of health, the primordial flesh will be released. Your remaining mana will be used to create both spatial shields and rapid growths of flesh to prevent death. This effect can only occur once per day.
Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic – Flesh Magic

Would you look at those multipliers? And the second tier doubled, didn't it?

She looked through the rest of the skill and smiled.

Something to prevent my death in case I hit one point of health. But… does it have to be like that? It does sound pretty disgusting. Also kind of cool, though… I can't decide. Both, I guess.

Ilea wasn't sure if she would've chosen the Class so readily if the flesh magic aspect had been mentioned.

Which one of my supposed teachers did that one come from, anyway?

She assumed it might have been any of them, except maybe the Ice Elemental and the Trakorov.

Either way, this one just made me ridiculously resilient, even more than I was. Now the changes to Phaseshift make sense too… With so much more health and resistance against all types of magic, and even physical damage, what could possibly stop me now?

Or… what would stop me from facing down beings like the Monarch or an Ascended?

She was smiling, feeling the heat that burned through everything she was.

One last skill remained.

[Space Awareness] becomes [Space Manipulation]
Passive – Space Manipulation – 3rd lvl 30
You have learned to see and manipulate the ever-present spatial fabric. You gain the ability to move anything within the fabric with a mere gesture.
2nd stage: Further understanding of the spatial fabric allows you to manipulate its forces with greater ease and higher intensity. You learn to perceive even the tiniest ripples in space. In the case of active fissures, you find yourself able to peer through to the other side. You gain the ability to anchor a spatial pocket to your very essence. Storage increases with the skill's level.
3rd stage: You have peered through the fabric of space itself and have learned to unravel its intricate structure. You gain the ability to perceive and differentiate magical frameworks, as well as manipulate them within your space without failure. You learn how to damage existing frameworks. Results may vary.
Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic

Not just awareness anymore… I can move stuff around now?

Ilea eyed a random pebble, raising her hand and willing it to move. She started laughing when the stone floated up into the air. Flicking her wrist, she made the small rock hit the nearby wall. Her eyes narrowed as she glanced at a larger boulder a few meters away.

As she gripped the framework with open palms, she focused and spread her arms. A crack resounded through the hall, and Ilea ripped the stone in two with nothing but her space magic.

Oh.

This does change things… a lot…

What a crazy Class change. I expected it to be good, sure, but this is better.

Can't wait to try it all out… and then show off to the Meadow.

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FIFTY

New Toys

Ilea was itching to test out all the new changes, but there were still a few more messages waiting to be read.

'ding' You have reached level 500 in three Classes while being human – 1 Core Skill point awarded

'ding' You have unlocked the General Skill: Telepathy – lvl 1
Telepathy – lvl 1
You have learned to communicate with beings through thought alone. You can initiate conversations with anything that may be receptive to this form of communication.
Category – Mind Magic

Nice. So, a better version of my third tier of Mental Resistance. But wait… a mind magic spell as a general skill. Does that mean…?

'ding' You have unlocked the General Skill: Minor Ice Manipulation – lvl 1
Minor Ice Manipulation – lvl 1
You have learned to form ice from surrounding sources of water and can manipulate it to a limited degree.

Category – Ice Magic

‘ding’ You have unlocked the General Skill: Minor Lava Manipulation – lvl 1
Minor Lava Manipulation – lvl 1
You have learned to form lava from surrounding sources of stone and can manipulate it to a limited degree.
Category – Lava Magic

‘ding’ You have unlocked the General Skill: Minor Earth Manipulation – lvl 1
Minor Earth Manipulation – lvl 1
You have learned to manipulate earth and stone to a limited degree.
Category – Earth Magic

She laughed out loud. “Right… thanks, everyone.”

“What’s going on?” Verena asked.

Does that mean I’m now some kind of elemental wizardess or something?

While it was fun, Ilea wasn’t under any illusions as to the power level of these spells. They had no multipliers, after all, and their names tempered her expectations.

She opened her palm and focused on her three new manipulation skills, forming a small rock first, somehow sourced from the rock around her. Next to it appeared a speck of glowing lava, and last a piece of floating ice.

I’m slowly turning into a magical creature, she thought as she made the three pieces spin around.

“Three new elements?” Verena asked.

“No. General Skills based on the evolution. Just minor manipulation.”

The Elder smiled. “‘Just’ minor. You’re likely not aware of how long mages work to gain an understanding of elements beyond their Classes. I suppose it’s a level five hundred evolution, though.”

“Yeah. And it’s a very special Class.”

She checked her status before considering anything else.

Name: Ilea Spears
Unspent stat points: 44
Unspent Core Skill points: 4
9
Unspent 3rd-tier General Skill points [2276 Total skill levels]: 1

Class 1: The Arcane Eternal – lvl 510
- Active: Archon Strike – 3rd lvl 30
- Active: Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 9
- Active: Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 7
- Active: Transfer [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 5
- Active: Arcane Dominion – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Sentinel Core [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 8
- Passive: Eternal Brawling – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Eternal Huntress – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Eternal Sight – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 6

Class 2: The Ashen Titan – lvl 508
- Active: Mantle of the Titan – 3rd lvl 30
- Active: Titan Core – 3rd lvl 30
- Active: Origin of Ash and Embers – 3rd lvl 30
- Active: Embered Heart – 3rd lvl 30
- Active: Tempered Seal – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 9
- Passive: Ashen Wings [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 6
- Passive: Vision of Ash – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 7
- Passive: Embered Form – 3rd lvl 30
Class 3: The Primordial Arbiter – lvl 500
- Active: Primordial Shift – 3rd lvl 30
- Active: Fires of Creation – 3rd lvl 30
- Active: Fabric Tear – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Reality Warp – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Primordial Flesh – 3rd lvl 30
- Passive: Space Manipulation – 3rd lvl 30

General Skills:

- ***Ashen Limbs – lvl 17***
- ***Bulwark of Ash – lvl 11***
- ***Dancing – lvl 5***
- ***Deviant of Humanity – 3rd lvl 22***
- ***Drill – lvl 12***
- ***Elos Standard language – lvl 6***
- ***English Language – lvl 15***
- ***Gourmet – lvl 7***
- ***Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 16***
- ***Heavy Archery – lvl 11***
- ***Identify – 2nd lvl 2***
- ***Meditation – 3rd lvl 16***
- ***Minor Earth Manipulation – lvl 1***
- ***Minor Ice Manipulation – lvl 1***
- ***Minor Lava Manipulation – lvl 1***
- ***Monster Hunter – 3rd lvl 14***
- ***Monstrous – lvl 5***
- ***Oxygen Repository – 2nd lvl 10***
- ***Sage of Torment – 2nd lvl 13***
- ***Soul Perception – lvl 11***
- ***Spear of Ash – lvl 19***
- ***Teaching – lvl 8***
- ***Telepathy – lvl 1***
- ***Veteran – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Warhammer Mastery – lvl 9***
- ***Arcane Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 21***
- ***Ash Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 4***
- ***Astral Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Blast Resistance – 3rd lvl 7***
- ***Blight Resistance – 2nd lvl 2***
- ***Blood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 18***
- ***Blood Manipulation Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Bone Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 18***
- ***Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Crystal Resistance – 2nd lvl 15***
- ***Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Dark Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 7***

- *Death Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Devour Resistance – 2nd lvl 8*
- *Diamond Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Divination Magic Resistance – lvl 10*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 5*
- *Emerald Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Flesh Magic Resistance – lvl 11*
- *Gold Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Gravity Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Heat Resistance – 3rd lvl 23*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Lava Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 9*
- *Light Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 3*
- *Lightning Resistance – 3rd lvl 10*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 3rd lvl 7*
- *Mental Resistance – 3rd lvl 18*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Obsidian Magic Resistance – lvl 3*
- *Pain Tolerance – 3rd lvl 3*
- *Petrification Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Poison Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Rot Resistance – 3rd lvl 4*
- *Ruby Magic Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Sand Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Sapphire Magic Resistance – lvl 13*
- *Shadow Magic Resistance – lvl 4*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Smoke Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Soul Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 16*
- *Sound Magic Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Space Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 7*
- *Stamina Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Time Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Topaz Magic Resistance – lvl 18*

- Vine Magic Resistance – lvl 14
- Void Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 16
- Water Resistance – 3rd lvl 4
- Wind Resistance – 3rd lvl 10
- Wood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

Status:
Vitality: 1806
Endurance: 450
Strength: 535
Dexterity: 450
Intelligence: 1660
Wisdom: 1820

Health: 68590/68590
Stamina: 4500/4500
Mana: 108983/109200

Three Classes at five hundred! I did it!

All this info could almost fill a book by now.

She laughed to herself, then refocused.

Sixty-eight thousand health. I'm looking more and more like some kind of monster.

Ilea was a little annoyed now that they had already killed all the undead in the tomb.

She gave Pierce a side glance, and the woman narrowed her eyes, lightning flashing around her before she vanished.

"What's happening?" Verena asked, looking at Ilea.

"I don't know what you mean," Ilea said innocently.

"Done with the evolution, then? I've never seen someone glow and burn quite as much from one," Verena said, giving the split stone a glance as she walked over.

"Mostly, yes. I want to test things now."

"Of course. I can help, if you like," Verena said. "Ah, that's why Pierce ran off."

"Great. I'll try not to kill you."

"I'm pretty durable. Let me know what you want to try."

The first thing Ilea tried was healing herself while infusing her ability with the Fires of Creation. The flames should now work on all her magic, and healing was part of her magic.

Her insides were wracked by flames, as expected, but her recovery prevailed. The result of the experiment was a subdued healing spell.

Not very useful. But maybe good for training Sentinels.

While the Fires of Creation were burning, she summoned a bit of ash, none of it connected to her body, and set it alight. Her mantle burned as it had before.

This is great. I can even infuse my healing and my reverse healing with the fires.

Ilea would've liked to set Pierce on fire using her dominion and reverse healing, but the woman had retreated far enough into the tomb to avoid her.

It doesn't work on my dominion itself… that's a shame. Maybe the perception it gives me doesn't really count as an active magical spell? And it's more just an aura of some kind? Let's find out how extensive it really is.

Ilea transferred. A sphere of arcane magic exploded outward, bringing with it a surge of white fire that set alight her close proximity. She slammed her fist into the nearby wall, her Archon Strike flaring out in a near-turquoise color of both concentrated arcane healing and wisps of flame.

Tempered Seal exploded in a similar manner, the fiery color a little closer to white. Ilea charged up just a tiny bit of heat before she cast Embered Heart, the sphere of flames now near-white as it flashed out from her.

Ilea looked down at her burning hands. She focused on the heat and power and found that it had an altogether different feel. Her health remained steady. Her healing and the reduced cost from the third tier of her fires were enough to keep her topped off, but she could tell the evolved version demanded a shit ton more health to sustain.

She looked at the flames spreading around her. The fires were eating through the walls of the tomb with frightening speed, leaving nothing behind.

More cost for more effect.

She waved her hand sideways, and all the flames disappeared. "Wonderful," she murmured, deactivating her spell.

I almost feel a bit terrified of myself at this point. My poor enemies.

She smiled and activated the Primordial Shift.

Ilea could see the wisps around her float away. The fabric changed, both where she stood and close by. Mana and health burned away to start her ability, Primordial Shift activating after a short delay.

Then her perception went haywire.

What the fuck is this?

She could see everything around herself, and not with her dominion alone. Weird bits of writhing space, flame, and flesh moved near her, burning through the fabric itself. Some parts of the phenomenon passed through the stone below with no resistance, while others broke off pieces instead. Her form remained unchanged and at the center of the spell.

Ilea could see the ground crack below her feet. She raised her arm, the movement slow and strained. It felt as if she was dragging it through mud. Her various perception skills told her the interpretation wasn't far off. *A mud of space and matter,* she thought, looking at her palm.

The Fires of Creation came to life, a small sphere forming above her hand, its brilliant white light illuminating the vicinity in unnatural patterns. The heat reminded her of the Wyrm's sun spell, her magic perception unable to determine exactly how much power gathered in the expanding sphere.

It's burning space itself.

Even as she dismissed the flame, some parts of her were already on fire. All of it vanished. She tried taking a step with the Primordial Shift active, her leg moving forward in slow motion. A boom met her ears as her foot came down, a web of cracks spreading outward.

As Verena looked on with wide eyes, her arms crossed, Pierce reappeared next to her.

"Attack me," Ilea said. Her voice traveled through what felt like an entire realm until it reached the Elders.

They glanced at each other and summoned their magic.

Spheres of fire and lightning flashed out toward the moving flames and writhing space. Most of the spells vanished outright, others slowed to a crawl and dissipated within moments. A few made it through, but most of their energy had been sapped before they reached Ilea at the very center of her spell.

She dismissed the magic, the upkeep ridiculous even with her high health and mana.

That was… fucking crazy. What the fuck even is that spell?

I'll need some insight from the Meadow.

Ilea gestured for the others to resume their attacks, forming one gate in front of her and another behind her. The spells moved through them and crashed against the damaged wall to her rear.

Hmm… with three sets of them, I suppose I could…

She formed six fields, covering herself in a space-like cube while floating in the middle.

This is stupid.

Ilea laughed and wondered if she was simply invulnerable like this. For a time, at least. The cost really did increase exponentially, both for having more than one field out and for the upkeep. However, now that the cooldown seemed similar to her first tier of Displacement, she would be able to more or less displace any magical or physical attack wherever she pleased. At a certain distance, anyway.

"How are we supposed to even hit you like this?" Pierce asked.

"That's the point," Ilea answered, dismissing the cube. She tried a few more shapes that looked a little more interesting than a cube but found they acted the same, except for the aesthetics. Ilea remained visible behind the fields, just slightly distorted to the eyes of a perceptive observer.

"Can you try to teleport?" Ilea asked.

Neither of the Elders vanished.

"Space magic is stupid," Pierce complained. "Now I don't have anything left."

"You're right. Can I try something?" Ilea asked.

"Go for it," Pierce answered.

Ilea raised her hand and gripped Pierce with Space Manipulation. "There is no escape," she said, raising the woman into the air and bringing her form closer.

"That's… k… kind of… hot…" Pierce breathed, her face a little flushed.

Ilea whipped her arm to the side and sent the woman flying.

"Now I feel dirty," she murmured.

So a level three hundred human isn't a problem for my manipulation. I mean, it's quite a gap, to be fair. I wonder how effective it'll be against a four-mark. Does it depend on size? Resistance? Magic type? Weight?

She assumed it was a combination of everything.

And what does that say about the Monarch's and the Ascended's space magic? Was my resistance just higher than Pierce's? Was either of them holding back? Or did they have worse or weaker Classes? The Ascended was probably holding back, to be fair. Even more reason to get a rematch.

But even if I can just slow someone down a little, it would help immensely. Same with any projectiles that come at me. Dodging will be easier, and if I can't dodge, I can just set up a gate or teleport the spells instead.

I actually feel like I could become a terrifying space mage now. Everything close to me will just be destroyed. Can't teleport, on fire, reverse healing, and on top of all that, you're fighting against a self-healing being that can barely be hit by anything.

Fun.

She rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck. "Feels good… oh, it feels so good," she said with a grin.

"Can you hear me?" she asked, using her telepathy on Verena.

"Yes."

So I don't need a voice module anymore.

Ilea decided to get a replacement regardless. Having a deep, booming voice still felt more fitting for the armaments than telepathy.

Still have the space pocket to test.

She checked to see if there was anything new and found she could access the space instantly with her skill. It felt almost the same as her storage items.

But where exactly is it… and how does it connect?

It took her a few minutes to find the tiny sliver with her Soul Perception. A bubble of space whose size she couldn't discern at all. She moved a few items from her necklace into the pocket. Everything seemed to work flawlessly. It seemed to have the same rules as her other storage items. No living creatures, no spells, and there was a limit to the space. Ilea just couldn't tell where that limit was yet. It certainly provided more storage space than her necklace and bracelet. Combined.

And it can't be stolen.

Ilea planned to analyze and test the pocket a little more before she'd trust it enough for an entire switch of her storage. It would be interesting to see if the Taleen keys could still be tracked while inside, but she assumed they could. Simply because they were part of a set, and likely connected in

ways that transcended pretty much all existing barriers and pockets. Much like anchors set by space magic in other realms. Even Scipio hadn't been able to hide the key completely, after all.

Ilea played around with her Space Manipulation a little more, ripping out chunks of the wall or pushing against it. She could damage the frameworks in any way she wanted, able to rip chunks of stone apart or simply pulverize them entirely.

Depending on how resistant the material was or how much she wanted to do, the spell took longer to manifest. It also cost more based on those factors. Compared to her Ash and Ember Unity, her new Space Manipulation required significantly more resources.

I wonder if the boosts to the various magic schools will increase my resistances, too?

"I've decided that I want a space magic Class as my third one," Pierce announced.

"Didn't you say you wanted a healing one?" Verena asked.

"That too. First healing, then space."

"*I* don't even have four yet," Ilea said, looking at the woman.

I wonder if I could just pop her eyes… no, don't become Violence. Only destroy eyes with consent.

"Do you want to train your Space Magic Resistance?" she asked with an innocent smile.

"Not with that look on your face," Pierce said. "I'll trust the Meadow's expertise."

"You said it was hot," Ilea retorted, a little disappointed.

"No I didn't," Pierce lied. "Are you done? Or do you want us to bow and praise the greatness of the divine Lilith and her new cleansing flames, the salvation we lowly human souls have craved for all our lives?"

"No, I'm done. We can move on. I'm just excited about my evolution."

Verena laughed to herself and headed back toward the halls they had come from.

Exciting, exciting, exciting. I hope we find some more things to fight. I want to use my magic.

But I should also get more used to the armaments.

Both, then.

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FIFTY-ONE

Beings Lurking in the Deep

The three adventurers returned to the cavern where Ilea had fought the Devourers. A spacious tunnel led deeper into the mesh of underground caves and forgotten ruins. Verena double-checked the map she had gotten from the guild and confirmed that the tunnel should lead to the Shining Caves.

The group continued for a few hours, walking through the dark caverns and sharing stories of past exploits. Ilea had the most impressive encounters over the past few years, but the Elders had quite a large array of more personal experiences to share. Each had taken part in hundreds of conflicts throughout the Plains and beyond as a mercenary, mediator, avenger, or just monster hunter.

At first, Pierce had complained about the slow pace and Ilea's insistence on staying in her armor, but as time went on, she too didn't seem too bothered anymore. Ilea was also enjoying the downtime for once. The past few days had been packed with dangerous fights and new revelations. Their encounter with Audur still felt like it had happened just yesterday.

Her meeting with the Navuun and Scipio still hadn't completely sunk in, the implications enough to involve all of humanity in her adventure with the elves. Adding a powerful artifact like the source into the mix created a whole new set of potential dangers. Plus, nearly every powerful party or species she knew about could get involved.

A lot to think about. But I'm not alone with all of it, and I can move and rip things apart with my mind now. That will help on my journey.

She wondered how she'd fare against the Monarch now. On the one hand, he had gotten to level one thousand, but on the other, he was a ranged mage. She was more concerned about his silent pole-wielding murder guardian.

Could I injure him now? Either of them? Was the Monarch just playing around with someone he considered too far below him to use any of his better spells?

Ilea didn't think herself too high and mighty, but even she had held back plenty of times against enemies she had considered considerably weaker than her. True, humans couldn't exactly be categorized after level three or four hundred, let alone five, but surely the same would hold for elves at twice her level.

I'll figure it out when I get there. For now, I'll just get as many tools and allies on our side as I can.

I'm feeling more anxious than usual.

She knew the anxiety wasn't just due to some of the recent battles. The discovery of Iz and the knowledge of what was down there, coupled with the recent completion of the teleportation gates, carried massive implications. The evolution made her feel a little calmer, but with everything she expected to change in the coming months and years, she still felt both anxious and excited.

And now, down here in these tunnels, she felt a little strange. The Elders of one of the most feared and prominent human Orders were walking beside her, telling of adventures past. To most humans, they'd be seen as unstoppable heroes, or terrifying monsters, yet she knew they were barely worth a mention in the grand scheme of things. As was she, for that matter.

But maybe not anymore. Not since I hit five hundred.

Could I face that Ascended? Even if he was holding back and using just a fraction of his power back then, I could tell he was no fighter.

"Stop," she said to the others and appeared on top of her armor. In the distance, stalactites were visible, with what seemed like a body of glowing water spreading out below. They were still over a kilometer away.

"Those should be the Shining Caves," Pierce said. "Why stop here?"

"I can feel mind magic ahead. It's subtle, but there's no monster close by, which means the magic has quite an extensive range," Ilea explained.

“You want to risk it? We could go back,” Verena said.

“It would explain why people either haven’t come back or are ‘not the same’ as they were before when they do,” Pierce said.

Ilea considered it. “I mean, I doubt there’s anything out there that could invade my mind in an instant. My resistance is pretty high, and I’ve trained with an Enavurin. But there’s no need to be arrogant either.”

She formed two ashen clones and infused them with a command. *Get me out of range if I lose control of myself.*

“You two should probably get some distance too, just in case I turn against you,” Ilea added, connecting her ash to the copies.

The Elders teleported a few hundred meters back.

“Shout if you have a sudden urge to kill everything!” Pierce informed her.

Helpful, Ilea thought as she got back into her armaments and walked forward. She couldn’t feel an instant push, nor did she feel overwhelming power. No, the magic here was way more subtle. Beyond even what Eve could do. *Might actually be close to what the Enavurin showed me back in the Descent.*

“Hello? Anybody home?” she sent in the general direction of the magic’s origin. At this distance, she couldn’t discern how powerful or far away the source actually was, but if it could communicate, it would be close enough for her telepathy.

“Interesting… A being capable of telepathy…”

The answer came almost like a whisper. The words were spoken in Elos Standard, but Ilea could tell the pronunciation wasn’t quite right.

“Yes. And I’d appreciate it if you could stop trying to get into my head,” Ilea said, still feeling the tendrils of magic trying to get past her defenses.

“Oh, so young and foolish. Come closer, I tell you, and all the riches of the world will be yours,” the being said in a calm, amused tone.

“I’m not looking for any riches. Who are you?”

“You will learn of me soon…” it said, then it broke contact.

Kind of ominous… and it’s still attacking me. Though it feels almost… residual? Is the magic just some kind of aura?

It asked me to come closer, so I assume the magic will get stronger the closer I get to the source. So of course, that’s what I’ll do.

But not yet.

A few steps back were enough to get her out of the creature's mind magic range. The invasive spells stopped immediately.

"Find anything?!" Pierce shouted.

"I'm fine, but there's a mind magic being in there that probably wants to eat us," Ilea sent. She appeared above her armor as the Elders wandered over and dismissed the ashen copies. "This is its domain, but the fact that the magic didn't chase me suggests that the being is stationary or simply refuses to move."

"So, what do we do?" Pierce asked.

"I mean, I'd go in and find out what it is," Ilea said. "But it also told me that I'll learn of it soon, whatever that means. Should be a good place to work on your Mental Resistance if you two want to try?"

"That sounds like a threat to me, so maybe it's preparing an attack. It's obviously going to be dangerous," Verena said. "Should we wait?"

"Yeah. I'll work on piloting my armor."

"I wouldn't say no to some Mental Resistance training either," Verena added. "If you can protect us."

"I'll try. But don't blame me if your brain turns into mush. How high is your Mental Resistance?"

"Probably not as high as yours," Pierce said. "It was one of the first General Skills I got to the third tier, but I didn't have many opportunities to train it. It's pretty rare."

"Not in my experience. But maybe I've just been lucky."

"Unlucky, you mean," Verena said.

"If you're offering to help us, I'd love a bit of resistance training," Pierce said.

"Unknown high-level being with an arcane healer and space mage nearby. Least amount of risk I've ever had with mind magic," Verena said.

"I'll keep an eye on you," Ilea said and vanished into her armor once again.

The two women entered the mind magic spell's area and glanced around.

"There's no magic h—" Pierce started. "Oh… wow. I don't think I would've noticed that without you mentioning it."

"So you would've died here," Verena said.

"No," Pierce answered. "I don't really need my mind when it comes down to it. Neither do you, as I recall."

“You’re giving away secrets to whatever creature is listening.”

The lightning mage shook her head. “Verena, she has a name, you know. Just because she’s a freak of magic doesn’t mean you should call her a ‘creature’.” She glanced back at the massive armor. “She’s still human… in a few ways. Maybe one or two. Her hair, at the very least.”

Verena ignored the remark and sat down to meditate, her brows twitching from time to time. Pierce walked from one side of the tunnel to the other, her eyes focused on the distant light. An occasional burst of lightning flashed through her mind. Ilea couldn’t quite make out what the spell did, but Pierce’s focus seemed to return whenever the spell hit.

A repeated wake-up signal? Or something to clear her mind of foreign magic? Verena is getting calmer with each passing minute. Her defenses are getting stronger.

Guess I should work on something, too. At least until we know what this creature is trying to do.

Ilea moved her massive arms around, keeping an element of her perception on the Elders as she tried to repeat some of the dance steps she had learned from Claire. An ashen partner would’ve been helpful, but the tunnel didn’t quite allow for two war machines of her size to coexist in a dance.

The ground rumbled with each of her steps. Ilea felt her balance waver when she couldn’t quite turn her momentum in the right direction. She flexed her hand, summoning an invisible force of space magic to push her shoulder forward as her left heel slammed down. She moved into a spin to finish the set of steps, spreading her titan form’s arms in a graceful gesture.

The manipulation is incredible. If I can even influence something this heavy…

Ilea tried not to rely on her space magic too much, but whenever she almost stumbled, she used it to catch herself. Her steps slowly improved with every try. She started to incorporate her gates to create an endless ballroom for herself, and soon she even added a wispy ashen dance partner, the two of them dancing through the gates with graceful, booming steps.

An occasional use of Primordial Shift let her test the limits and weight differences between her various forms. It would take time to get used to everything, so she decided to postpone any third-Class skill enhancements with Core Skill points for the time being. Each of her spells would take quite a hit if reset to the beginning of the third tier.

I should focus on my two main Classes first, even though these newly evolved skills are just so much fucking fun.

‘ding’ Dancing reaches lvl 6

As the thunderous dance continued, debris fell from the ceiling, a web of cracks spreading out across the floor wherever she moved her massive armaments. The only thing Ilea was missing was music. Not that there were instruments in Elos capable of competing with the sound emitted by a one-woman construction site of reinforced and living steel.

She looked down the tunnel and wondered when they’d be attacked.

Or is it waiting for us to go in?

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FIFTY-TWO

Master of the Mind

After a while, they decided to advance a little into the tunnel. Things were getting boring. Each of Ilea's steps echoed through the cavern as she advanced. The mind magic was constantly trying to weasel its way through her defenses.

The Elders walked next to her. Ilea kept an eye on them with her healing, but it seemed they were doing alright on their own.

They continued for a few minutes before reaching the entrance to the actual Shining Caves, where fluorescent plants made the water shimmer with blueish light. Ilea could already see a variety of mostly humanoid creatures lurking in the caverns' darker corners, some hiding behind stalagmites, others crawling on the walls.

Those lying in wait were mostly sentient creatures – dwarves, Awakened, and such – but there were also many monstrous forms Ilea didn't recognize.

So it prepared a trap for us?

"We're going to have company any moment now," Pierce said.

Verena looked around, her eyes burning with a bright flame. "They're being directly controlled."

"What do you mean?" Ilea asked. She could see all manner of creatures in her dominion, many of them decked out in rusty gear.

"Look at their minds. They're not damaged," Verena replied through telepathy.

Ilea checked them with her healing and came to the same conclusion. The mind magic's influence was obvious, but it differed from the damage she had taken in her training sessions.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"If this thing isn't willing to move but set up a trap here, the easiest thing would be if you took one of them outside of its range," Verena said. *"And see what happens."*

"Right."

She wondered if there was another way for her to set them free and what kind of lasting damage there would be, but other than killing the source of the mind magic or taking the beings out of its range, there was nothing she could think of.

Not that it's a difficult proposition with my upgraded space magic.

"I'll give it a shot," Ilea said, transferring out of her armaments.

While they'd been speaking, the controlled creatures had surrounded them, the first of them now fully revealing themselves, screeching or hissing. Different kinds of magic flared and flashed.

Many of them were clad in armor, some piloting ancient-looking war machines. The Awakened were rarer, and many had natural weapons like claws or fangs. Most of them were dwarves or monstrous critters likely native to these depths.

Ilea watched as nearly a hundred beings advanced on them, charging now, with weapons drawn and spells flickering to life.

"Oh no! We're being swarmed!" Ilea called out in a dramatic tone.

"Why are you stealing my—" Pierce started.

Ilea waited until most of them were in her dominion and then used Fabric Tear, using a chunk of mana to move all of the creatures away from the cavern. A few spells were loosed her way before she used the spell again to follow them out.

When the beings were bunched up in the tunnel, now out of the monster's range, she saw the mind magic connection fade. And all it had taken was incredibly powerful space magic and a ton of mana.

Easy.

She watched them look around in confusion. A few of them collapsed immediately, others fled in a panic. Some were even preparing to attack the beings next to them.

Ilea spread her arms and released a charged-up whistle. Monster Hunter froze near everything in the vicinity, only a handful of the beings resisting the effect.

"Do not be afraid," she said through telepathy, Monster Hunter spell relaying the same sentiment. *"You were under the control of a mind magic creature. Don't attack the beings next to you. You can leave this way,"* she said, pointing away from the shining caverns.

Most of the monster-like creatures rushed away in a panic. None of them was above level five hundred. Instincts, coupled with the confusion of escaping the mind magic after however long they had been trapped, pushed them forward.

"'Do not be afraid'? Really?" Pierce asked, crossing her arms.

It was clear to Ilea that Pierce was just envious of her awesome magic and incredible charisma.

Yes. That's how it is.

She poured a bunch of healing into the recently freed beings to try and counter whatever damage the prolonged exposure to the creature's mind magic had done to them, though she was unsure if there was damage and unsure if she was healing anything. At least it seemed like nobody had died from the sudden disconnect, not even those who had collapsed.

I would guess the mind magic creature still had to make sure everyone ate and drank, though being stuck like that for however long can't be healthy.

"I'll go get the rest while everyone gets their bearings," Ilea said to the Elders. She teleported back in, then returned less than twenty seconds later with the remaining creatures she had rounded up and teleported out.

Kind of scary how easy that was. Reminds me of our first mission, the cave with the… death spirits? What were they again? There was mind magic, too. And now I can just walk into this creature's domain without being fazed in the slightest.

She thought back to Harken's army.

How easily I could catch them all now. I've been scary before, but I'm becoming increasingly so.

"What year is it?" one of the less-affected dwarfs said, touching his dirty beard as he looked around at the assortment of survivors. He piloted a war machine that seemed much more awkward in its movements than most everything Ilea had seen in the Pit.

“I have no clue,” Ilea admitted.

“I serve Garl Heinhall, King of Erlen,” another dwarf said.

“Erlen hasn’t been a kingdom for two hundred years,” another said. “Kanner Miel was the Champion of the Forged Dome when I came down here. I’d like to send that damned mind creature to the depths myself,” he said, turning toward the Shining Caves.

“Bloody Paarah. Kanner was the third Champion of the Dome! There were seventeen when I was last conscious,” another dwarf said and started laughing.

A hiss came from a wisp-like being at level three twenty. “You are in the presence of a Great One, bow your heads!”

“Aye, she’s great indeed. Got us out of this mess,” another said. “I’ll be off, then. Feels like I haven’t had a good drink in a few hundred years. Cheers, lass.”

“No need for anyone to bow their heads,” Ilea said, addressing the wisp being. “Just go without violence. Dwarves, maybe make sure the other sapients make it to the city without being splattered by the cannons.”

“Cannons? They finally built them, then – hah!” one of them said, then waved to the group. “Come on, then, I’ll pay for a round of ale for all of you. If gold is still worth anything.”

Roars echoed from within the cavern.

Round two?

“Sounds like it has something else prepared. I’m glad I got all of you out,” Ilea said before addressing Pierce and Verena. *“Should we get going?”*

“Wait! Ashen one, please, will you grant us the honor of your name?” a heavily armored blob with three sets of eyes asked her.

“Lilith. I’d be happy to have a drink with all of you when I’m back up in the Pit,” she answered, watching the group of about forty sapients start making their way back through the tunnel. She noted that there weren’t any humans in the group. *“Oh, the tomb is sealed in. You’ll have to break through.”*

“We know our way around, don’t you worry,” one of them said, patting a crying dwarf on his back. “You made it out, quit your bellyaching.”

“My king…” the other one wailed.

“You’ll find another,” a snake-like creature said with a hiss, slithering past the two before it gave Ilea a slight nod.

Many of the others were quiet, contemplative, exhausted, and obviously relieved. Their armor was the only indication of how much time each of them had spent down in these caverns.

And all of them are above two hundred… probably had to be to survive for this long.

Ilea teleported herself and the Elders a few times, appearing within her armaments less than a second later. Heat and mana flowed into the machine, much faster than her first activation, as she looked around within her dominion.

Pierce and Verena prepared their magic as five large rock worms near level six hundred approached. The beings were slow and bulky, protected by a thick stone carapace.

"You took what is mine!" the voice rumbled in her head.

"They are their own," Ilea answered. *"I just set them free."*

She could tell the worms weren't awakened based on her healing. It would take more than one Meadow to help them get there.

Rifle in hand, a beam of near-white flame and energy flashed out from the titan. Chunks of smoldering worms fell to the stone ground, some tumbling into the underground lake.

"You resist me?" the being asked, confusion evident in its voice.

"Yes," Ilea said as she looked around. She couldn't see any other enemies in the vicinity, the cavern falling quiet again as the last rock worm died.

The creature didn't communicate with her anymore, instead doubling down on its attempts to take over her mind, now much more direct than before.

"It's getting overwhelming. I'll retreat for now," Verena said. "Call if you require help."

Pierce ground her teeth and followed her fellow Elder, their defenses cracking now that the creature was no longer trying to be subtle. Ilea transported them out with her teleportation, then imbued her copies with a new command to stay behind and get her out if she didn't return within fifteen minutes.

"I'll check out what this creature actually is," she sent to the Elders.

Beneath the underground lake, more tunnels and crevices led deeper into the ground, so Ilea simply followed the mind magic constantly coming her way. Soon, she had to start healing against the constant damage.

When she reached a set of broad crevices, she was finally able to locate the source of the spells. Another group of controlled beings ambushed her when she jumped down.

This time, she left her armaments and raised her arms. Space Manipulation froze the thirty or so beings in place. Ilea added Monster Hunter for good measure, noticing her control increase greatly at the sudden lack of struggle. She stored her armaments for a while and used her upgraded Displacement to move the creatures back up and away from the source, along with herself.

Once again, she stopped in the tunnel, just outside of its range, though she kept her manipulation active. It seemed these beings were even older and at a slightly higher level than the ones she had brought out before.

I hope they can recover from all this. At least it seems like most of them are of sound mind. Better give them an extra dose of arcane healing.

“I think you’re freaking them out,” Pierce said, sitting on a nearby rock and eating a piece of cooked meat.

Ilea glanced at the thirty sets of eyes staring at her with a mix of admiration, terror, confusion, and, most concerningly, reverence.

“Ah. I don’t feel like giving them the talk again,” Ilea said, setting them all down. “Don’t start killing each other. And go that way,” she added, pointing.

“I can take care of that,” Verena said, looking at the beings. “Some of you need a bath.”

“I agree,” one tall, spindly humanoid with white skin said, summoning a sphere of water and dousing itself. “Aaaah… this is good… What even happened? I feel… confused.”

“Mind magic…” another said. “It… it had us trapped… How long have we—”

Ilea waved and vanished, leaving the rest of the aaahs and ooohs to Verena.

A few teleports brought her back to her last position, where she summoned her armor again and jumped down. She came out in a mostly dark cavern, a few streams of slightly fluorescent water flowing down the walls.

Her dominion picked up a few moving beings. Larger than the ones that had attacked her a few moments earlier. A growl rumbled out from a dark

part of the cavern, followed by a few more. Then a chill wind flowed past, and ice gathered on her ash.

[Glacial Frost Hound – lvl ???] – [Frenzied]

The creatures were as tall as she was, nearly pure muscle with four white eyes on their large heads. Spikes grew out of their pale blue skin, visible frost exuding from their presence alone.

Ilea could see five of the beings within her dominion, their clawed paws freezing the ground they tread on. All five were close to level nine hundred.

I might be dealing with a four-mark after all, she thought, raising a heavy steel arm.

The hounds rushed her, mana gathering around them, but were slowed by her Space Manipulation. All five struggled against her hold, her arm slightly shaking as she tried to freeze them in place entirely.

She saw through her dominion and healing that the mind magic creature didn't seem to control these creatures fully, only slightly nudging them in Ilea's direction. They were monsters through and through.

She formed a gate in front of her and a second one above the creatures when three of them sent white beams of ice magic her way. The spells left a trail of frozen stone in their wake before vanishing into the slightly shimmering space, reappearing above the beings before they were struck by their own attacks.

I could probably face a level two thousand creature of this intellect now, Ilea thought, her left hand still raised to keep them where they were. Her ability to make them hover a bit helped tremendously. None of the hounds could get any traction on the ground to push against her magic.

More beams came, once more vanishing into the same set of gates. Ilea released Embered Heart where she stood, a good chunk of the energy flashing out into a newly formed gate next to her, the fires coming out on the other side.

She heard a sizzling sound when she deactivated her gates, letting go of the hounds as she reached the halfway point of her mana pool. The new abilities were powerful, but they cost a ton, too, especially against high-level creatures like these.

Ilea watched two of them roll on the ground to put out the white flames clinging to their bodies. The other three charged ahead, shooting another set

of beams toward her. Fabric Tear made the spells reappear above them, and the creatures were struck by the very spells they had just formed.

Cheaper like this…

She could see her armor freezing over from the sheer presence of the hounds. Ilea formed two gates just before they reached her, the three hounds vanishing into the portal before they reappeared about fifty meters above her.

That didn't cost a lot either. So as long as I don't use the gates for prolonged periods of time, they're not too bad on my mana.

She ignored the falling monsters and walked forward, her gathering heat getting rid of the ice as she formed a mist of white, burning ash. She stopped the two still-burning hounds again with her space magic and covered them entirely in white flame.

She activated reverse reconstruction as three hounds fell and two were pressed to the cavern floor, all five within her dominion. The Fires of Creation burst from their mouths and eyes, their roars filling the frozen cavern as spells were shot in random directions, ice spikes exploding outward from the five monsters. The airborne three finally slapped against the stone floor, their hide and bones protecting them from any damage from the fall.

Ilea increased her weight and gathered heat. Her burning ash continuously formed and covered the struggling creatures, while her Space Manipulation pushed them back down whenever they managed to stand up.

She targeted their eyes, getting better results than her previous failed attempt at simply ripping them in half. Aiming her rifle at the first creature she managed to blind entirely, she sent a beam of charged heat into its open maw. Glowing white energy punched into it before it exploded in shattering chunks of thawing meat.

Easier than the Bluetails, she thought, shooting the next one. Three more shots and she was done, silence returning to the cavern. *Seems like Space Manipulation is more than just a fun new thing to play with, and the gates are just as good as I thought they would be.*

Only their aura managed to damage my armor. And even that was kind of laughable for a bunch of level eight hundred beings.

'ding' You have defeated [Glacial Frost Hound – lvl 859]

…

‘ding’ You have defeated [Glacial Frost Hound – lvl 873]

Not even twice my level. You’ll need more to stop me, mind monster in the dark. She wasn’t surprised to see not a single level up from the battle. *Probably a good chunk of experience, but the challenge just wasn’t there, even with the constant mind magic.*

“I do not understand,” the creature whispered, now much closer.

Ilea walked through the darkness until she found a small opening in the cavern wall. Within, she perceived what looked like a beating heart. The mind magic here was enough to stretch even her defenses.

“What’s so hard to grasp?” she asked as she aimed her charged rifle, healing her mind as wisps of white flame floated around her armaments.

“You should not be this dangerous,” the creature said.

Ilea didn’t feel like waiting any longer; her defenses were struggling against the continuous stream of mental bombardment. She sacrificed a few thousand points of health and released Embered Heart into the Wyrm’s eye within her cannon. The spell manifested and lit up the darkness. Something quivered inside the opening before it stopped moving.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Necaloph – lvl 609]

The mind magic ceased instantly, the pressure gone, the Shining Caves now only that. Ilea checked the body with her healing but ultimately left it where it was, most of it ashes now.

Just a level six hundred. You weren’t supposed to be this dangerous either.

She stretched, freezing when she noticed the casualness of her movement in the heavy armor. Nothing about it had changed; she simply felt more comfortable using it.

There were more tunnels leading down into the dark, but she decided to return to the others for now. Looking up, she frowned at the impossibility of going back all that way with her armaments around her. She tried with her wings, but even with the help of her Space Manipulation, her efforts were in vain.

Ah well, can’t have everything, she thought, making the set vanish before she flew up to rejoin the others.

Verena had managed to convince most of the survivors to leave, but not quite as effectively as Ilea. Three dwarves and two armored beings of shadow had remained.

“We must join the hunt of this ghastly creature. For centuries has it enslaved our very minds; it is unacceptable for us to stay here and wait while this creature remains,” one of the dwarves said.

Ilea landed and summoned a meal, forming an ashen chair before she relaxed. “It’s done.”

“You killed it?” Pierce asked.

“Yeah. A Necaloph at six hundred. Pretty low level for what it managed to do.”

“That sounds familiar,” Verena said and gave her a look.

Ilea smiled and started eating. “What’s that look for?”

“Oh, nothing at all,” Verena deadpanned.

“You already killed it?” the dwarf said. “While leaving us out here?”

“You would’ve died in that battle,” Ilea said, focusing on her food. “I’m sorry, but at least you’re alive, and you’re free now.”

The dwarf grumbled and trudged past her into the caverns, his hammer at the ready. Ilea didn’t stop him, too busy enjoying her food and thinking about the battle. She considered how differently that fight could’ve gone without her recent evolution.

Freeing everyone would’ve been a lot harder. And more time-consuming. And the hounds could’ve been an actual struggle. I don’t think I would’ve had to retreat, but with the evolution, it was just… effortless.

And compared to hitting something really hard, I have to say it’s very fun to use my space magic. And the gates… hmm… I can’t wait to fight something stronger, where I have to use everything I have. And I’ll want to enhance these spells too, see how they change.

Ah, I can’t wait.

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FIFTY-THREE

Demons of the Ancient World

Two of the remaining beings were some type of shadow creature. They seemed interested in talking to Ilea, but they waited until she was finished eating. That alone made her inclined to hear them out.

“Truly, she is touched by the Spirits of Old,” one of them said when she was done.

[Shadow Mage – lvl 283] – [Shade]

The other one was a few levels lower but otherwise the same. Both looked like manifestations of shadow, loosely humanoid in shape, their armor somehow held together by their mist-like forms. Two sets of glowering dark eyes hovered between the slits of their helmets.

“Well, if the thing is dead, I’ll be returning to the Pit as well. Come on, Brand, let’s see what useless brat has taken over our smithy,” one of the remaining dwarves said. “Thanks, Lilith, and Elders. Do come around if we manage to rebuild some of our reputation. I’ll give you a five percent discount.”

“Suppose that’s one way to travel through time,” Brand said, a steel-covered hand touching the damaged chin of his ancient war machine.

“Five percent for saving someone’s life,” Pierce laughed.

“Not like we would’ve noticed if ya hadn’t,” the first dwarf answered with a smile. “Garlan Kornwatt’s the name.”

“He’s got us there,” Ilea said with a smile of her own.

The two Shades kept their distance. Based on their movements, they were likely communicating with each other.

Verena crossed her arms and sat down on the ground, a meal appearing in her hands as well before she started eating in silence.

“We wish to ask the ash-touched a question,” one of the shadow beings said.

“You don’t need to be so formal,” Ilea said.

“Very well. Our apologies, being of the fabric. Is it merely an assumption that you came here in search of the Soul Forge?”

Ilea raised her brows. “Yes, that’s an assumption, and it’s not true. I have no clue what you’re on about. What’s the Soul Forge?”

They glanced at each other. “She does not know.”

“She does not.”

“Has she unleashed the Wardens?”

“It is a possibility. The location is likely.”

“A creature of the mind, to calm those that rest below.”

“It was killed.”

“The path is free, but she does not desire what lies within.”

They both looked back at her. “Being of ash,” one of them began. “There is a legend in these lands, telling of Khan Joggoth. A ruler of dwarves, a maker, and a master of essence itself.”

“His armies were defeated. They lay forgotten and destroyed,” the other one continued. “Though few remain, the danger they pose is great. Within the Soul Forge, they rest. Waiting to return, and to rule where once they were defeated.”

“A battle was expected, once, long past.”

“And yet it never came. Defeated they were thought, but now we know. Subdued, they were, instead.”

“This guy and his forge are below the Shining Caves?” Ilea asked.

“The findings suggest such, yes. We can guide you on the path we once sought and teach you what we learned in preparation for our search.”

Ilea turned her head to look down the tunnel toward the Shining Caves. *Something’s coming.* She stood up and summoned her armaments. The others reacted to her but didn’t seem to understand what was going on.

“The ground is vibrating,” Ilea informed them.

“It has begun,” one of the Shades said.

“We shall retreat… to the settlement above,” the second one added.

“Find us when the battle is over. May we all survive the wrath of the Soul Wardens,” the first one said before they bowed in sync, then floated away in their dark metal armor.

“Soul Wardens. Didn’t Bralin mention them? They’re some kind of legendary war machine, right?” Ilea said when she spotted the first of them in the distance. Its distant outline was even larger than her armored form.

Sure. Defeat one ancient thing, and another one shows up in turn. Well, I’m happy for another fight.

“Do me a favor and warn the dwarves. Though I expect their cannons to be ready either way,” Ilea sent to the Shades. Then she prepared for battle.

The approaching being looked as if it were made entirely of steel, the words ‘full plate’ not even coming close to how armored it was. No eyes showed beneath its helmet. It moved with practiced motions, a massive, nearly two-meter double-edged sword in its right hand, the blade glowing with a pale magical quality.

Installed on both its arms were extensions that looked to have barrel-like openings in the front. Its steps boomed through the tunnel as it approached, its three-meter-high form nearly as broad as it was tall.

I’m heavier, Ilea thought with a slight smile, already increasing her weight as she charged heat within her. Ash spread out nearby as the Elders made some distance, floating back with their magic at the ready.

Ilea raised her hand when the being entered her domain. Her Space Manipulation gripped its framework, but she found herself unable to stop it entirely. Her hand quivered as the war machine pushed against her hold, both through a form of magic and simply by surging forward with its enormous metal body. Each of its steps seemed a struggle now, but it pushed on regardless.

Ilea could hear a few more of them coming from the caves. She watched the magic flow around its form and raised her brows. The war machine was entirely covered in a thin layer of soul magic, its sword glowing with energies of both death and soul. As it raised its arm, a projectile of green energy shot out, which she displaced right back to the sender.

[Soul Warden – lvl 608]

Ilea let go of her manipulation, unable to do more than slow the Warden down. Burning ash flowed out and into the tunnel, filling its entirety with white flames. She heard a strange whistling sound.

Interesting.

The being had raised its right arm, a shield of death and soul magic flickering within the flames. Its magic was being continuously damaged, but more fuel came from within the war machine. Most of its form was now covered by the Fires of Creation, yet still it pushed on.

Ilea watched as it pushed through the flames, its sword coming at her in a slashing strike from above. She didn't try to dodge the fast strike, unable to match the speed of the Soul Warden while she used her own armaments.

The blade cut deep, biting into living steel with the help of magic, though it wasn't just that, Ilea realized, as it bit into her armored neck. It was stopped, but the Warden had managed to strike as deeply as the Devourers had with their claws. Perhaps even more.

She moved ash limbs out of her back, releasing Embered Heart in a wide chaotic beam from point-blank range and into the Soul Warden's head.

The tunnel lit up with magic, Embered Heart's near-white flames brushing away what had remained of its shield and its shimmering layers of magic. The steel below was burned away, and a deep indentation of glowing steel formed where the beam hit the being, heated metal dripping down its chest. The beam hadn't penetrated all the way through the war machine, nor was any of the tunnel damaged beyond what the Fires of Creation had already done.

Two more Soul Wardens entered Ilea's domain as she gripped the first war machine's blade with her right arm, pulling it out of her already healing neck armor as she activated her healing to check her foe's anatomy.

There was none. Only steel. Steel and magic.

Nor could she discern a core or any enchantments similar to how the Taleen Guardians operated. Its insides weren't hollow, and the soul magic she had felt still remained, though it was subdued and being pushed back by the white flames spreading over its massive form.

It's regenerating, too, she noted, spreading more of her flames to prevent that. Her Space Manipulation became less effective when she

pulled the blade from her steel form, the being pushing back with its massive metal arm.

“My spells don’t seem to do anything,” Pierce said from the side, her lightning flashing through the flame-lit tunnel and crashing against the war machines, running toward them with magic shields extended.

“Go help the survivors escape to the Pit. I’ll join you there once I’m done. Collapse the tunnel after yourselves,” Ilea said with her telepathy, feeling more tremors coming her way from below.

“Good luck,” Verena sent, vanishing together with Pierce just as a fiery explosion made the tunnel vibrate. Several tons of stone came crashing down behind the warring titans.

As Ilea’s weight peaked, she reached the highest point of her heat generation, another beam digging into steel. She could feel the Soul Warden’s grip on its sword slacken. She moved her hand, ripping it away with her manipulation, and the burning steel clattered to the ground.

Two deep, glowing pits had been burned into its form, but it remained functional. Ilea pushed it back with her own steel arms, watching it fall with a heavy impact. A bed of burning ash spread over it, quenching every bit of magic that flowed to the surface.

She extended her hand and fired a beam of bright energy into the tunnel, entirely disintegrating the first Warden’s shield. She melted a burning dent into its shoulder, yet it marched on without pause.

The second one sent a few death magic projectiles her way. All of them vanished and reappeared in bright explosions against its back. The energy bit deep into its metal, the death magic spells almost acting like an acid. Large parts of steel were eaten away, but the machine kept on moving ever forward, toward the enemy titan.

Ilea felt the cut in her neck wasn’t repairing itself quite as quickly as she had expected. *Same death magic.* She saw the remaining energies fighting against her healing and her armaments’ ability to repair itself.

Ilea displaced the massive double-edged greatsword into one hand and pushed her mana into it. Enchantments lit up along the weapon, and its edges hummed with arcane energy, the entirety of the blade bursting with white fire.

She laughed within her heavy armor, a ding resounding in her mind when whatever force had animated the steel being died out below her bed of burning ash.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Soul Warden – lvl 608]

Tough fuckers.

“Who’s next?” she said, pushing the Warden’s large steel body aside with a swipe of her arm.

* * *

Verena heard dulled impacts from behind the collapsed walls. She sent a few more explosive spheres against the ceiling as they teleported back toward the tombs.

“She’s really good at unleashing ancient evils,” Pierce said.

She is, Verena thought as they caught up to the armored Shades and a few of the survivors. “We have to pick up the pace,” she warned them. “The Soul Wardens are coming.”

“Soul Wardens? Next you’ll tell me there’s a dragon nest below these caves,” one of the dwarves laughed.

The others, though, seemed to sober up.

“Where to?” one asked.

“Through the tomb,” Verena said. “We’ll have to dig or teleport through a section of collapsed tunnel, but it will lead us out.”

“Ah, they were right, then,” the dwarf said, looking at a group of survivors already heading in the right direction. Some were still looking at what was left of the undead, while a few were inspecting the temple.

Pierce clapped her hands, a thunderous sound spreading through the large cave. “Gather up, people!” she shouted. “Monsters on the moooove!”

Verena gave her a nod and led the group upward as quickly as they could manage.

“Soul Wardens… so the curse of Khan Joggoth existed after all,” a dwarf said.

“Of course. None of these legends are made up,” Garlan said. “Just buried under metric tons of stone and metal. Ah, but if we could get our hands on their machines…”

“Magic, not machines,” one of the Shades informed him. “Bound they lay, hidden in the depths of the Soul Forge.”

“Unleashed by burning ash,” the second one finished.

“My great-great-great-great-grandfather used to tell stories about the terror of the Soul Wardens,” Garlan said. “He did like to exaggerate, but I’m glad that ash monster of a healer is dealing with them now.”

“More ways exist,” the first Shade said.

“Out from the depths. Be prepared,” the second one added.

Some of the dwarves groaned, others gripped their weapons. “Trapped for centuries, just to go right back into battle,” one said with a tired voice.

“You’re damn right we are,” another added with enthusiasm, gripping the first dwarf’s shoulder as he walked past.

“Can everyone teleport through?” Verena asked, pointing at the cave-in where their group had entered the tomb.

“No,” a few of them said.

The others got to work, using earth magic and heavy tools to dismantle the natural barrier. Heavy impacts made the tunnel shake, chunks of stone were pulverized, and support beams were added. Verena almost felt bad about collapsing everything again after they’d gone through.

“We should’ve joined Lilith in her battle,” one of the Awakened said.

“You heard her whistle. You saw her, didn’t you?” one of the dwarves said. “She wasn’t human, or dwarven, or like anything I’ve seen before.”

Another laughed. “Aye. She’s there not because she wants to protect us, but because she wants to fight them.”

“Why did you come to the Shining Caves in the first place?” one of them asked, looking at Verena.

“There was a quest offered. She thought it was interesting,” Verena answered.

And now we have another thing to deal with.

She knew that Pierce would simply leave the dwarves to their plight. Perhaps the cannons and preparations up in the Pit would be enough to fight whatever ancient war machines they had unleashed, but she knew Ilea wouldn’t let it be. They had unleashed these beings, and they would end them.

They soon came out into the near-endless pit through the crevice in the wall. Already, dulled sounds of battle resounded from deep below. A few war machines were flying upward, two with trails of smoke and missing limbs.

“Soul Wardens coming up, better get going!” one of them shouted, laughing as he passed her.

Verena watched as the Awakened and war machines Ilea had rescued pelted past her. Many took flight, while others simply gripped the stone wall before climbing upward with surprising speed.

“What will you do?” Pierce asked as she stepped next to her.

Verena looked down into the depths. “Some of them are still fighting.”

The lightning mage laughed. “Great. Good luck. I’ll go warn Bralin and his dwarven lot. See you on the field of battle.”

She saluted, a smile on her face, then jumped out into the pit and flashed away, a streak of lightning that rushed up and past the slow-moving war machines.

Verena focused, flames heating her skin as she cracked her neck. She activated her auras and jumped down, the sounds of battle like music to her ears.

Let’s see what they can do.

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FIFTY-FOUR

The Fires of Creation

“Sure the boss won’t notice?” Grahn asked.

Bralin looked up as the barkeep of the Somber Core Smithy glanced around the dimly lit room. Not many patrons were present; one had passed out, and two were engaged in a deep conversation about sword enchantments. Bralin preferred it that way.

He downed his whiskey, then looked at the barkeep and grinned. “You know him. When did you last see him working on his machine? He doesn’t know what half the inventory even is, and the rest he uses in downright offensive ways.”

Grahn huffed. He filled himself a tankard and drank, leaning back against the reinforced wood. To anyone worth their steel, the dwarf would immediately stand out. Only someone with decades of experience could make the way he moved his old machine seem so casual.

The inexperienced dwarves, either young or those from outside, often looked up to those with the most shiny and impressive suits. The problem with high-quality machines was that they did so much for the wearer.

Lilith is the same, Bralin thought.

Living steel was some of the highest quality anyone could get. He was most interested in the person who made that for her, more so than the suit itself. If he could get in touch with its maker, it would change his lot in life. That much was sure.

A red light flickered on above the entrance, then another near the restroom, and a third above the bar. Every dwarf in the room stopped their conversations. They looked around and got up, visors coming down to cover their faces.

“Wouldn’t be surprised if it was her,” Bralin joked, giving the barkeep a smirk as he too stood up to leave. He considered grabbing his actual machine, but that would create a lot of unwanted attention – and other long-term issues.

It would take another century to fix his reputation, and he wouldn’t risk anything right now. He poured himself another whiskey and took the glass with him. Grahn walked next to him with his tankard in one hand and a massive hammer in the other.

He could hear the alarms when they stepped outside. Everyone who was at least at level two hundred would join the front line to defend the Pit against whatever creatures were slithering up from the depths today. It was always a massive event. Profitable, too – sometimes.

Groups of war machines rushed past, heavy breaths audible from within their helmets. High-end machines flew above them, next to mages and Awakened wearing normal armor. Then the first cannon was fired, the sound reverberating through the entirety of the bowl-like Pit as the ground shook. If anybody had failed to receive the message, they’d know now.

As much as the battles were usually quick and underwhelming, Bralin did enjoy the spectacle. Every time. It was one of the reasons he had come here, after all. The life of the nobility just didn’t appeal to him.

The smell of heated metal permeated the streets now, smoke and fire rising in the distance. Explosions boomed and thundered. More cannons started firing. The two moved into a jog, both closing their visors as they activated their magic. Thick stone armor formed around the most important bits of Bralin’s suit, runes etched within. They glowed with power, and his speed increased.

“I’ll see you in the fray,” he said to his friend and stomped forward. Each step propelled him through the smoke. He jumped and landed on a simple square stone building to get a better view.

He swore under his breath when he saw a dozen flying war machines above the pit, their arms raised with green projectiles shooting out at both the cannons and defenders. He had seen them before; the design was unmistakable. Not in person – few alive still claimed they had. But the

history books remembered them, mostly as a way to scare children and dissuade experimentation with both soul magic and necromancy.

“Soul Wardens!” he shouted, both as a warning and a call to rally. They wouldn’t beat those things with their usual sense of arrogance and competition. He would organize the front and push them back.

Fuck. And I liked my anonymity so very much.

Bralin ran and leaped again, several machines landing next to him, three at the front with heavy shields and four at the back with both magic and slug cannons.

“Damage their weapons. Anti-soul and magic only. Defend!” one of them shouted as the first projectiles impacted the shields. Another five Soul Wardens had appeared.

Dozens of spells harried the floating machines, the outer cannons now taking aim inward, despite the damage they would cause in the town. Bralin heard a cannon power up nearby, energy brimming through its tubes, before it propelled a one-meter-thick slug of enchanted steel at one of the machines.

He saw the Soul Warden explode in a fireball of arcane energy, both its form and the slug flying off into the city, crashing through the homes and smithies of a few unlucky dwarfs. His stone magic wouldn’t do much against them, but if he could get close enough, some of his runes might do some damage. For now, he focused on deflecting the machines’ acid-like death magic.

Another one went down, falling as if invisible strings had been cut. *We have to keep them near the pit*, Bralin thought as the war machines reached it. Hundreds of spells were exploding above them, three of the fourteen cannons already taken out.

Valves opened all around the pit, pouring acid into the depths. Barriers formed and were shattered, most of the better runes already destroyed. More steel forms were already emerging from below.

There are too many.

* * *

Ilea swung her massive sword to the side, splattering white flames across the destroyed wall of the tunnel. Five half-molten Soul Wardens lay behind her. Her armaments had taken quite a few hits, mostly due to her wish to

have a few flaming sword fights, even though she had no skill in actually using a sword.

I didn't study the blade. Truly, I'm a failed being.

Still won, though.

Ilea waited for a little while to see if more soul machines were coming, using the time to fully regenerate her armor, but no more arrived.

I should regroup with the others.

She turned around and looked at the caved-in stone. Storing her armaments, she teleported through, quickly flying through the caverns, the tomb, and out of the crevice and into the pit.

There were traces of the Elders here. Her mark on Verena suggested she was up near the settlement, and her dominion picked up several Soul Wardens floating up from below, more already flying up toward the pit. She heard a booming sound from above, a flash of light partially illuminating even the deep part of the pit she was in.

The cannons!

Ilea smiled and ascended, casually dodging the swords and projectiles of the nearby Soul Wardens, though she had to teleport when one of them suddenly appeared next to her.

[Tuned Soul Warden – lvl ???] - [Soulforged]

The war machine looked mostly the same as the others, its back adorned with four cannon-like extensions aiming upward. The same soul magic flowed through it as through the others, likely what made it move in the first place.

So there are more dangerous ones. That's good for me.

She sent beams of heat at the steel creatures and covered all of them in white flame as she passed, quickly rising up through the dwarves' circular pit.

Let's hope they haven't breached the city proper, or this will get messy.

Ashen wings moved her ever upward when she saw the first chunk of smoldering, half-molten war machine fall down toward the approaching enemies. More impacts could be heard now, the thunder of magic cannons filling her ears as her fires burned brighter.

Here we go.

* * *

Bralin and a few others were hiding behind rubble, shooting spells at the floating Soul Wardens, when something white lit up the darkness far below. He paused as an acid bolt struck his shoulder, unable to get through his reinforced and rune-protected armor.

As Bralin formed a wall of stone to add to the perimeter, the dozen Wardens above were reduced to four as another volley came from the outside cannons. Teams of flying war machines went after the damaged enemies.

“Keep them here! We must not let them roam into the city!” a dwarf shouted nearby, expertly dodging a bolt before he aimed his arcane cannon at a Warden, firing a beam of red energy.

One of the damaged Wardens landed. Its sword cut the legs off a now-screaming dwarf, the only defender of a group of terrified mages. Bralin jumped in front of the war machine, shooting a few heavy chunks of rock at it, then raised the ground and pushed the injured warrior back and out of the way.

“Spread out and aim!” he shouted, ducking under a horizontal swing from the enemy machine. His own suit was quite a bit smaller and not nearly as heavy, but it didn’t look like an experienced, or even conscious, dwarf piloted the cursed thing.

He dodged to the left, a blast of death magic just barely missing him. He formed a shield of stone, and though the Warden’s enchanted sword cut through it like paper, it gave him enough time to take a single step back, the tip of the blade leaving a deep scratch on his chest.

Several blasts crashed into the Soul Warden, diverting its attention for a split second. Enough for Bralin to form and charge a heavy boulder. He let the spell loose, aimed at the machine’s right hand and sword arm. The blade was pushed aside, but it wasn’t enough to disarm the thing.

He made some distance when Verena appeared, clad entirely in flames. She twirled in the air and then slammed her foot down onto the steel hand of the Warden, ruining its already weakened grip. The blade clattered to the ground a few meters away.

Bralin covered it in stone and jumped aside as a projectile flashed past. “Its other arm!” he called to the woman.

Blasts of flame roared over the Warden as another two of them landed nearby. The pit defenders around Bralin had apparently retreated a few blocks back, as none remained in the vicinity. “Cowards…” Bralin grunted with a broad smile. At least the mages had taken the injured dwarf with them.

The human grinned as well, landing next to him as spheres of fire formed around her.

“Where are your friends?” Bralin asked.

“Any moment now,” Verena said.

As the Soul Wardens raised their arms, death magic gathering on their arm-mounted cannons, Bralin stepped in front of the human and formed a wall. He braced for the impact, but nothing came. Moving the stone away, he saw the war machines were gone. He looked up to see a winged humanoid clad in white flame floating over the center of the pit.

“There you go,” Verena said.

Bralin peered up at the flying being, squinting his eyes before he recognized her. *Lilith, eh?*

“You seem pretty confident,” he said, noticing Verena relaxing her posture.

“Just enjoy the show,” she said, walking to the edge of the pit.

Bralin raised an eyebrow and followed. When he looked up again, the white-flame-covered Lilith was gone.

Bralin expected to see dozens of Soul Wardens coming up from below, but all he found were struggling war machines covered in white fire, all trying to hit three fast-moving beings of ash.

Copies?

“Are the Wardens… teleporting?” he remarked, seeing more Wardens appear below.

“That should be all of them within the city,” another voice said.

Lilith stood next to them now, her entire form clad in white flames that burned atop a smooth set of heavy ash armor. Her wings were folded on her back, wisps of burning ashen limbs coming out from between them. Two horns extended from her helmet.

Dozens of the dwarves’ war machines had advanced again due to the lull in battle, though Bralin saw that many sections of the defenses hadn’t been breached like the one he was in.

“What’s happening?” someone shouted.

Lilith glanced over, then she whistled and vanished.

‘ding’ You have heard the call of a powerful being. Stand down.

Bralin saw a bright white light flash up from somewhere down in the pit. More magic flared, and heavy impacts echoed up from below as the ground shook, ash and white flames now shrouding everything nearby.

“She’s fighting them alone?” he murmured, looking at Verena.

The woman had sat down to meditate, a few wisps of flame moving around her as she calmed her breathing. “We would only get in the way.”

“Keep your distance!” Bralin shouted as healers made their rounds, defenses were set up, and teams regrouped. The cannons were reloaded and charged, aiming down into the pit. New barriers came to life, further obscuring what was happening below, their magic shimmering with gray light, the runes now tuned to protect the defenders against soul magic.

The entire vicinity was lit up from time to time, the impacts now less frequent.

“I didn’t know you were high-ranked enough to give commands,” Verena mused, opening one eye to look at him.

Bralin formed stone walls farther back, setting up new defensive positions for war machines and mages. “I’m not. Nobody’s in charge here.”

He could see the heavy suit of Helwart Maulstroem standing on a half-destroyed stone house, and a few other influential dwarves were nearby. They seemed just as happy as everyone else to leave this cursed enemy to whatever being had shown up to assist them.

Under normal circumstances, intervening would be a grave offense. But it seemed even the Champion of the Forged Dome agreed that the reemergence of the Soul Wardens wasn’t something they wanted to take lightly. Help was, for once, welcome.

Good thing he’s more reasonable than the last few Champions.

Lilith’s voice suddenly invaded his mind.

“Hey, Bralin, have the cannons prepare to fire.”

“Prepare to fire!” Bralin shouted, his voice a little deeper than usual. *“Telepathy, too?”*

“Of course. Well, it’s new.”

“Something coming through?” he asked, trying his hardest not to be fazed by the whole situation and the woman’s behavior. He had seen a lot in

his many years, but a single flaming winged creature facing down the war machines of Khan Joggoth was not on that list. If anything, he expected her to be a dragon in disguise.

Shouts went through the groups, the cannons charging up as the barrier wavered.

"I am," Lilith answered.

Bralin heard the barriers shatter before a beam of near-white flame fired up and out of the pit. He was deafened a split second later when the cannons fired down into the burning debris.

A high-pitched whine rang in his ears as he walked toward the edge again. He looked down, and as the dust and ash cleared, he saw that all traces of fire had entirely gone. A distant set of impacts could be heard, but not as many as they had functional cannons.

Oh, so that's how it is.

He grinned and shook his head before he walked to Verena. "No Wardens left. Come, before someone unpleasant starts asking questions."

"I don't have anything to hide," Verena said.

"Yeah, but I do," Bralin said. "And I'd rather not have them connect you lot to me."

Verena smiled and vanished, reappearing in a half-destroyed stone house about twenty meters away. Bralin glanced around, wondering where the third member of their group was. The telepathic connection was gone, and with it any trace of the mysterious flaming creature.

"Hail the wrath of King Valkor!" someone shouted. Other cheers chimed in with similar things. A few started praising one god or another, but in their euphoria, assigning this glorious victory to the ancient king who had defeated Joggoth in the first place made the most sense.

"Quite something, that Lilith of yours," Bralin said after he and Verena had walked together for about half a minute.

"She's ridiculous," Verena smiled. "A Shadow through and through."

Bralin saw a war machine walk out of a nearby alley. Quite large and well-made, dark steel enchanted to the very limits of the materials. He knew the owner, too, or at least their name.

Didn't he use another model to fight?

Something felt off about his movements.

"Master Helm. Are you injured?"

The dwarf didn’t respond. Instead, the visor opened to reveal a human woman. Pierce, the one who called herself ‘Dragonkiller’. She had a confused expression on her face.

“You must have mistaken me for someone else, young man.”

“You three are mad,” Bralin said. “Make that thing vanish – I’ll help you make it unrecognizable later. You look like a noble child stuck inside a bloody war machine!”

The heavy armor vanished, and the woman bowed slightly.

“I must’ve missed the battle,” she said.

Verena grunted.

“She dealt with it, didn’t she?” Pierce said. She giggled and slapped Bralin’s suit as she walked past. “Great distraction. And now my financial situation looks much, much better, too, for some unknown reason. First round’s on me.”

“As long as you spend your gold in our fine establishment,” Bralin said, checking behind them to see if someone had seen the spectacle, though it seemed most people were either hunkering down at home or still near the pit. The celebrations would start soon, but they managed to slip through.

They reached the smithy about ten minutes later. The few workers downstairs were all gone, while upstairs, Bralin found a black-haired woman sitting alone at the bar. In the absence of any ash and fire, she almost didn’t look like a monster.

“Grahn doesn’t like people serving themselves,” he said as he walked behind the counter, doing the same.

“It’s a special occasion,” Lilith said, raising her mug.

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FIFTY-FIVE

Ingenuity

Ilea took a sip of her ale and smiled.

Verena gently touched her shoulder before she teleported behind the bar. She grabbed a whiskey bottle and reappeared next to Ilea, pouring herself a glass. “Well done on the cleanup.”

“Thanks. They were holding up pretty well on their own, though,” Ilea said. She had done a quick check on the injured during her attempts to get all the Soul Wardens back toward the center of town. It turned out that war machines were, unsurprisingly, quite durable. Most of them, at least.

While she believed the city would’ve had a good chance of dealing with the problem itself, there would’ve been a lot of losses. She had seen only three healers among the hundreds of warriors, engineers, and mages. At least her dominion allowed her to check up on a lot of people with little issue.

The Sentinels could’ve made a massive difference in this fight. Just shows again that healers are underrepresented.

And it shows how strong I’ve become. The recent evolution really makes even large-scale battlefields like this pretty manageable. I wonder how the demon invasion of Ravenhall would’ve gone with me as I am now.

And those cannons. Oh… the cannons…

A warm smile spread across Ilea’s face as she remembered the heavy impact that had managed to cave in her chest despite her layered mantle. No

wonder the dwarves could fight back against even four-marks emerging from the pit.

We need some of those in Ravenhall. For fucking sure.

“Hundreds would’ve died, at least,” Bralin said. “Not to mention the destruction that would’ve come with it. You’re the hero of the Pit, unsung as of yet.”

“And so it shall remain, for a while at least,” Ilea said. “Enough people saw me that rumors will likely spread. But let it take a few days, weeks, or even months. Wait – actually, it might be good if the name Lilith starts spreading at some point.”

For potential future cooperation.

What with the teleportation gates and all that.

She smiled to herself and gave Bralin a meaningful look.

“After your performance today, I’ll do anything to get into your good graces, oh goddess of ash and flame,” he said, raising his tankard.

“None of that god talk,” Ilea said. “I’m just your average adventuring gal.”

“Oh?” Pierce mused, mixing herself a drink with fruits and a bunch of different types of alcohol behind the bar. “The goddess does not like her devout followers?”

Ilea gave her a look and smiled. *Don’t show your weakness.*

Pierce stared back but returned her attention to her drink a few seconds later.

“I assume the Dome fight is off, then?” Ilea asked.

“Why?” Bralin asked. “The attack was a little different than what we usually get, sure. And the help we received from a currently unknown source was strange, but if anything, it will make the fights even more sought after. What with how everyone got pumped up to fight the Soul Wardens, and all of it ending so quickly. You’ll do just fine. If you’re still interested, of course. Though people will know who you are once you show your powers.”

“I’ll keep it to my armor and maybe a few tricks,” Ilea said, summoning the massive sword she had taken from the first Soul Warden she had destroyed. The thing appeared in her hand before she laid it down on the bar. “It does look a little ridiculous without my armor on.”

[Blade of the Warden – Ancient Quality] – [Allows for magical infusions] – Enchantments [Mana Flow 3 / Sharpness 4 / Self Repair 2]

Bralin chuckled. “Yeah, plenty will be hunting for those now.”

Ilea glanced at him and smiled. “Hmm, if only someone had collected about sixty of them.”

“We’ll buy them if you want to make a deal. First, I want to buy one for myself. I can get you an idea of the price to go for.”

“I want one too,” Pierce said.

Ilea gestured for Bralin to take the blade on the counter. “It’s yours. Pierce, you pay me. What do you think I can get for one, Bralin?”

“He gets one for free?” Pierce exclaimed, nearly spilling her drink as she spread her arms.

Ilea gave her a confused expression. “Of course. It’s Bralin. A long-term ‘not fucking annoying’ person in my life. And I didn’t see you anywhere near the pit, so you likely went looting. Did you at least get the key?”

Pierce scratched her head. “You know, I tried. I did. But your mention of the location was… vague, and the area was incredibly well enchanted.”

“So that’s why you’re here,” Bralin said with a smile. “I thought as much.”

“What do you mean?” Ilea asked.

“Someone as powerful as you doesn’t usually show up somewhere without a reason. Not without having ties to a place. There are quite a few powerful and ancient artifacts here – that and knowledge guarded for millennia. I’m not sure what key you mean, but yes… stealing might be your only option. That or…”

He smiled, then burst out laughing.

Ilea gave him a look.

He calmed down after a few seconds, taking a swallow from his tankard before he spoke again. “Stealing or, well… beating the Champion of the Forged Dome. Which hasn’t happened in… seven years now? Something like that.”

“Coincidentally, I’m already signed up for my first fight,” Ilea said.

“Weird, right?” the dwarf said. “Ah, I’m having such a great time. The last few months were getting a little boring.”

“She does that,” Pierce said. “It mostly has to do with the insane risks she takes and the luck she has in somehow getting out of it all alive.”

“It’s called being a healer,” Ilea said. “People are coming, by the way.”

“Being a healer doesn’t even come close to what you can do, oh almighty Lilith,” the Dragonkiller said.

A moment later, a group of dwarves and Awakened entered the bar, led by Grahn. They were talking loudly, already boasting about their exploits in the short-lived battle against the ancient menace of the Soul Wardens.

The lead dwarf went behind the bar and gave Bralin a meaningful look. He started filling tankards, handing them out to the dust-covered, bloodied warriors, receiving cheers in return. As he did so, the barkeep whispered something to Ilea that most people would’ve missed.

“Thank you.”

Ilea looked at him, then cheered with everyone else who had participated in the battle. *Glad I was able to clean up so efficiently.*

“The Shining Caves are cleared, but I kind of doubt that was the last you’ll see of the Soul Wardens,” she said to Bralin and the Elders.

“This telepathy thing is really useful,” Bralin replied.

“It is. I’ll still need a replacement for the voice module, by the way,” Ilea informed him. *“And we have another two days until the first arena fight. Before that, I’ll go down the pit again to finish off whatever is in that Soul Forge.”*

“The Soul Forge?” Bralin asked as he raised an eyebrow. He tried to look casual, but the impact of her words was obvious.

“I want my war machine first. Otherwise, I can’t train,” Pierce said.

“You got one too? Congratulations,” Ilea replied in a dry tone.

“If you wouldn’t mind someone else joining you, I’d love to accompany you three to the Soul Forge. There’s bound to be interesting treasure. And knowledge that may or may not be best left undiscovered,” the dwarf added with just a hint of concern.

“I doubt it’ll blow our minds,” Ilea answered. *“But sure, you’re probably tougher than the Shades, and they said they knew the way.”*

Bralin seemed thoughtful after that and finished his tankard with a slight smile, the group’s attention returning to the celebrations and their drinks.

* * *

An hour later, they retired to the workshop. Pierce was eager to get her stolen goods prepared for battle, and Ilea didn’t exactly dislike the idea of

no longer being the worst war machine pilot in the vicinity.

“I’ll go look for the Shades,” Verena said and vanished.

“Thanks,” Ilea said telepathically as she saw her form appear within her dominion.

She summoned her armaments, and as she healed the remaining damage from the pit, Bralin brought another voice module over and went to install it.

“Not quite as large as mine,” Ilea said, looking at the war machine in front of her.

Pierce leaned against it with a casual expression, swirling the drink in her hand slightly. “Oh, you know. The best pilots are the ones with the older models. You wouldn’t understand.”

“That is a high-end machine. What Lilith has is simply beyond the normal standards,” Bralin supplied, though he knew full well that she was joking.

“Taking the side of the goddess… Well, what else would be expected from an opportunistic dwarven noble hiding amongst the common plebs,” the Dragonkiller said before she sipped from her drink.

“On point observation.”

Bralin tapped the voice module and pushed it a little farther into the side of Ilea’s armor.

“Check if it works,” he added, handing her the sender.

“Best war machine around,” she said, speaking through it with her now familiar deep, booming voice.

“Probably,” the dwarf said, turning to the other machine in the back hall.

Pierce’s ‘acquisition’ was propped up by several steel beams, arms lifted to allow better access. A few half-finished or damaged machines stood nearby, while bright white magical lights with a hint of blue lined the high ceiling.

Bralin walked around it, occasionally giving the machine a tap. “Been a while since this one got some proper maintenance.” He closed his visor and got out a few tools. “You ladies mind if I play some music?”

“Music? As in, recorded?” Ilea asked.

“Yeah. Not easy to make but quite popular in the Pit. I know most rich folk prefer live renditions.”

He activated an enchanted box, and the sound of string instruments immediately billowed out, a surprisingly fast pace compared to most music Ilea had heard so far in Elos.

“I want this,” she said, carefully touching the device with childlike fascination.

[Voice Summoner – Rare Quality] – [Enchanted]

“It’s quite a nice device to have around,” Pierce agreed. “Can it be louder?”

“It has a few gears. Feel free to fiddle around with it. What color did you want it in, dragongirl?” Bralin asked.

“It’s been a while since someone called me that,” Pierce said with an almost predatory grin. “Make it blue. Dark blue.”

“As you wish, princess.”

As he continued his work, occasionally humming along with the music, Ilea tried the different gears.

One thing she noted was that the piece only seemed to allow a single song to be captured, and its mana was used up rather quickly, meaning someone had to recharge it after every single rendition. Not much of a problem with her extensive inner storage space and incredible wealth, but it would take some time to record the music.

Ah, I wish I had some epic battle themes. But I’d have to try and recall everything, give a musician my shitty rendition, and then have them copy it with actual talent.

“How much is one of these?” she asked. “Without a piece of music stored inside.”

Bralin glanced back at her, his arm thrust partway into the other war machine’s back. He shrugged. “Three or four gold pieces.”

“What if I buy a hundred?”

He shook his head. “Gods,” he muttered. “Where exactly did you come from again? No, don’t tell me. For a hundred, you might get a ten to twenty percent discount.”

“Hmm, I could have Goliath copy this.”

A tool clattered to the floor.

The music was still playing in the background as Bralin stared at her. “Did you say Goliath? As in, the legendary Awakened smith from

Hallowfort?”

“Yeah, he made the armor.”

“By Lilith,” he whispered. “You truly do not cease to surprise. He’s a fucking legend. A myth. Every year, there’s another fool who goes north to find the settlement.”

Right. It isn’t super easy to stumble into.

“Any of us ever make it up there?” Bralin asked. “Out of curiosity.”

Ilea nodded lightly. “Yeah, there’s quite a few dwarves there. Mostly various Awakened species, though. Terok is one of the dwarves, if you know him.”

He got back to work. “Terok, she says. I know about eighteen. A few of them went north, too. Might just be he’s a distant cousin of mine.”

“Dwarves and their names,” Pierce commented.

He pointed at her without taking his eyes off the steel plate he was checking. “You’d better watch your mouth. Lots of things can go wrong with a high-power war machine like this one.”

“Just put in a remote detonator,” Ilea said. “Maybe then she might actually shut up.”

“Don’t give him ideas, I can only get so excited,” Pierce said before she groaned. “Ah, it’s not the same knowing you’ve actually faced down a dragon.”

Another tool fell to the ground. Bralin looked up and sighed. “Please. I’m trying to work here.”

“How long will it take?” Pierce asked. “I’m already bored.”

“We can go sign you up for the Forged Dome,” Ilea suggested. “I’d love to watch you fail.”

Pierce whistled. “You’re on, goddess. I’ll fight you to the bitter end.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

The Elder finished her drink and placed the glass on a nearby workbench. “Let’s go, then.”

Ilea nodded. “Yep. See you later, Bralin, and thanks for the work.”

He hummed along to the music and waved them off. “I owe you at least sixty gold pieces for that sword.”

“It was a gift.”

They teleported out into the street, Ilea stretching as she breathed in the fresh air coated with a healthy layer of smithing fumes and metal particles.

“I’ll give you one for eighty-five,” she whispered to the Elder.

Pierce looked at her and huffed. “I will purchase your intriguing tool. Here, that should be sufficient,” she said, summoning a small chest carved with obviously dwarven runes.

Ilea checked the thing and stored it, a hundred gold coins richer. “You’re even worse with gold than I am,” she said as she threw the woman one of the massive blades.

Guess it’s fine. I just saved their city.

After I doomed it.

Well, kind of.

Pierce caught the sword with surprising grace, swinging it around before she made it vanish. A few people stared at them, one young dwarf rubbing his eyes.

“Gold holds little meaning for me, Lilith,” Pierce said in what seemed to be a haughty accent.

“Seems like Verena found the Shades,” Ilea said. “She’s coming back this way. Let’s meet her on the way, and I can try some of the local dishes too.”

“Always thinking about food,” Pierce said, following Ilea into a side alley.

“Yeah. We just had a fight. Food is the next step.”

Ilea was soon enjoying her first bowl of steamed vegetables and juicy green meat. The hint of metal added a unique taste to the dish. Pierce joined in, adding a bottle of ale or some other drink to each plate or bowl.

By now, the festivities had spread throughout the whole of the Pit. Either that, or it was just a normal thing at this time of day. A time of day Ilea couldn’t quite discern without a visible sun. Dwarves greeted them as they passed by, many with light bruises, dents, or cuts on their armor. Some were even missing limbs. The machines, that was, not the people piloting them.

“You’re healing them, aren’t you?” Pierce said.

Ilea swallowed, her eyes closed as she enjoyed the taste of her dish. “Hmm. What? Oh, yes, of course.”

“Have you no regard for the local healer guilds? How else will they make a living?” she deadpanned.

Ilea could see into most of the nearby shops and smithies. They weren’t near the wealthier areas in the higher sections of the bowl-shaped town,

where enchantments likely protected against that kind of intrusion. That and against invading beasts.

“They don’t exactly seem to have workplace safety laws,” she said, seeing a working dwarf hiss as he slipped and cut off one of his fingers.

He grabbed the finger with gritted teeth before he watched the thing regrow instead. Glancing at the severed digit, he threw it into a nearby fire. The dwarf muttered something as he looked up for a brief moment and then got back to work.

“Hmm, this one is good,” Pierce said. “Forge’s Forge Ale,” she added, reading off the label. “If only everything didn’t have this slight taste of metal.”

“Might just be the air,” Ilea said. “Probably not healthy either.”

“Ah, you’re just blowing things out of proportion. Typical healer talk. A bit of metal in the air is perfectly healthy,” Pierce said, waving to the other Elder as she headed down the street toward them.

“I’m sure,” Ilea said.

Verena was followed by the two familiar Shade creatures, their excitement almost palpable. Both of them gawked at everything they passed. One stopped to pick up a block of iron from a stall. The other one joined to add some commentary as they both admired the piece.

“Thanks for finding them,” Ilea said when she reached Verena.

“They stand out. It wasn’t difficult,” Verena said.

“This place is full of wonder,” one of the Shades said, a joyous expression on the mist that passed for its face. Ilea didn’t know how she could tell, but she chose not to question her sanity quite yet.

“We wanted to sign Pierce up for the Forged Dome. Care to join us?”

“Ah, yes! We have heard much of this fabled Dome,” one of them said, returning the slab of metal without another thought.

I wonder if they’ve already forgotten about the Soul Forge.

Ilea pondered the implementation of forges in pretty much everything around them as they made their way through the city. The building they sought wasn’t hard to find, but the problem was that most of it was gone.

Hmm.

An avenue of destruction led from their position to a distant cannon, the likely culprit of their current issue.

At least it got the Warden, she thought, turning back to the shattered stone building and the remains of a downed Soul Warden, a massive slug

stuck in its torso.

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FIFTY-SIX

Forges

A group of five impressive-looking war machines crouched over a downed Soul Warden, discussing the steel and make.

“Can we sign up for the Dome with you lads?” Ilea asked them.

One glanced up. “We’re busy. Leave us be, human.”

Ilea was wearing a set of casual clothes, her usual attire for city exploration.

[War Machine Engineer – lvl 230]

Pierce looked at the dwarf and started laughing.

“Something funny?” he asked, standing up now. His machine was nearly three meters tall, the heavy steel dented and cut in a few places, one shoulder nearly fully melted. “We finished this one off. Its steel is ours.”

“Keep the steel. Where do I sign up for the Dome?” Pierce demanded.

He huffed and nodded to the right side of the building.

“Appreciate it,” she said curtly, the dwarf giving her a wary eye as she walked past.

Ilea wondered what they’d even do with the Soul Warden.

Melt it and make war machine pieces? Probably.

A small stone shack had been raised in a small yard to the side of the building. Inside, several dwarves were sorting documents and searching

through piles of dust and debris-covered furniture.

“Ah, this won’t do, this won’t do. Why would they aim exactly here…” the one at the center of it all murmured.

“It’s probably not the best time,” Pierce said, “but I’d like to register for the Forged Dome.”

The dwarf looked up and smiled. “Ah, not at all. Registrations can be done at any time. A human? Greetings to you all. I’m Marilla Brickhammer, administrator of the Forged Dome.”

She wore a set of armored robes, sockets of various colors suggesting it was some kind of suit to be worn within a war machine. Her thick brown hair was perfectly braided, and her keen green eyes took in the newcomers.

“Dragonkiller Pierce,” the Elder answered. “And my crew,” she added, gesturing to the others.

Ilea huffed at that and crossed her arms. “Sure.”

The dwarf raised a brow at the name but didn’t seem to mind terribly. “You’re all rather impressive. I suppose you’d have to be, to come here as humans. Very well, then. How would you like to join? Alone, or as a group? And against other contestants, or against monsters?”

“Alone, against another contestant,” Pierce said.

“Good. Be aware that the fights can end in death, though it’s generally seen as admirable to end the fight when the other party surrenders or when their war machine is taken out. You do have a war machine, I hope?”

“I do. Do I have to use it?”

“The Forged Dome aims to test the strength and power of its contestants, not their ability to avoid a fight and win through attrition. If you are judged to be avoiding a confrontation, you will be disqualified and banned from participating in the Dome,” Marilla explained. “Now, I don’t want to assume anything based on your species or preference not to use armored suits, but this isn’t the wilderness. Certain expectations will have to be met.”

Pierce grinned. “I see. Then there won’t be any issues. Am I allowed to continue the battle if my war machine is taken out?”

“Of course,” the dwarf said, smiling. She shook her head slightly and summoned a large tome, flicking it open. It was clear she thought the idea ridiculous. “When can you fight?”

“Two days, was it?” Pierce asked, looking back at Ilea.

“Yeah,” Ilea said, turning to address the dwarf. “If she’s going to fight a newcomer, how fair is that fight going to be? I don’t think I’ve seen many war machines at level three hundred.”

Marilla allowed herself a bigger grin. “I’m the only one who knows the levels. They are not documented at all. And I… am impartial.”

Her joyous demeanor made it clear that she must enjoy the obvious imbalances. It would surely make for an entertaining show, especially with boisterous young fighters facing down experienced veterans. And later on, there would surely be more even matchups, once the newcomers established themselves.

“Two days. At the twentieth hour. Dragonkiller Pierce. Or should we announce you differently?”

“Just Dragonkiller is best,” the Elder said, nodding self-assuredly.

“Perfect. That alone will attract hundreds,” Marilla said. “And if you win, there will be more fights afterward. If you can still fight, or want to, that is. Now, if that is all, I’d like to return to the cleanup. That cannon really did a number on our archive.”

“Of course,” Ilea said. She stepped away, and the others joined her as they walked back toward Bralin’s workshop. “Your fight is just an hour before mine,” she said to Pierce.

“And I expect you lot to cheer me on,” Pierce said. “I want to have a moment of glory before this ash monster takes the stage and upsets everything beyond anything believable.”

Ilea smiled at her. “You give me too much credit. It’s not like I just finished off an ancient threat to this settlement on my own.”

“Keep gloating. Overconfidence doesn’t suit the living.”

“I agree, you know? But with you, it feels good to gloat.”

“Her arrogance is well-founded,” one of the Shades said.

“Indeed. She is beyond all sapient beings we have met,” the other added.

“Don’t encourage her,” Pierce said.

“She’s not beyond the ones we met,” Verena added.

“Not even close,” Ilea confirmed.

But closer.

The Shades communicated with each other with exciting gestures. “We would very much like to meet said beings, should that be a possibility in the future.”

“Much can be learned from those of power, old and young,” the other one added.

“I’m sure there will be a way,” Ilea said.

She was thinking of the Meadow, wondering if the tree would someday become some kind of pilgrimage destination.

A pilgrimage might not even be necessary once the gates are established.

I’m excited for that.

Visit the ancient tree and receive its guidance! Only fifty gold pieces!

“How far away is the Soul Forge from the Shining Caves?” Ilea asked as they neared their destination.

“It should not be far,” one said.

“The being of mind would not have had the same impact,” the other added.

“Good, then let’s pick up your armor and leave,” Ilea said, glancing at Pierce.

“Perfect. I’ll need every minute I can get to train with that machine,” the Elder said.

Oh? She’s actually invested. Well. Now I want to improve my war machining too.

Ilea hoped that Pierce would win her battles, because she really wanted them to meet in the Forged Dome.

They’re going to have a field day watching two bumbling pilots duke it out.

* * *

“Back already?” Bralin asked when they entered the extensive hall.

Pierce’s war machine looked a little different now. The helmet was thinner, the visor slit at a higher position. The entire plating had a blue sheen, and a few tubes had been added to the major joints at the elbows, shoulders, knees, and boots.

Pierce whistled. She approached the armor and admired it. “Yes… I like this very much,” she whispered.

“It does look quite impressive,” Ilea admitted.

“Shouldn’t be recognizable to anybody other than the maker, and even they would have to get a very close look. Just don’t try to sell it and you

should be golden," Bralin said, tapping the machine's arm. "Now, are those the Shades you mentioned I see? Greetings."

"Greetings, maker," they whispered in sync.

"Shadow-Touched. Rare to see your kind these days."

"We were freed," one of them said.

"By the bearer of the white flame," the other added.

"Oh, that's a good title," Ilea said.

"Careful, or it will stick," Verena warned.

"I'd prefer a cool one to stick." Ilea looked at Bralin. "We're looking to get to this Soul Forge thing before our battles. You wanted to join in?"

"Of course. Officially, I'm off to search the pit for more Soul Warden swords."

"I'm sure we'll find a few more on the way. Are you ready to leave, then? Or do you need to prepare things?"

"I've got everything in my storage amulet," he said, tapping the massive steel chest of his war machine.

Ilea glanced at the Elders and Shades.

"We will leave when it pleases the ash-touched," one of them said.

"Do you guys have names, by the way?" Ilea asked.

"Shadow-Touched don't claim names," Bralin said. "If I remember correctly."

One of them floated a little bit closer. "Indeed not. We are but children."

"Yet to awaken," the other finished.

"Sounds… interesting. Well then, let's leave," Ilea said, transferring herself atop of Pierce's armor and sitting down on the shoulder.

Pierce vanished into her armor and powered it up. Her steps were slow and considerate. "Oh… this seems easier," she said, her voice muffled from behind the thick steel visor of her helmet.

"The added tubes should help you move," Bralin explained as he made for the exit. "Weighs the whole thing down just a little more, but with your level and mana, it shouldn't be much of an issue."

"I will expect you to pay for the ride," Pierce said as Verena appeared on her other shoulder.

"You got training wheels," Ilea said.

"What's that?" Verena asked.

"No bikes here, right?" Ilea said absentmindedly.

“Told you she’s not from here,” Pierce murmured, then focused on following the dwarf, her blue machine shadowed by the two Shades behind.

They were soon wobbling toward the pit. The massive war machine garnered more than a few looks, and not just because of the two humans sitting on its shoulders. By the time they reached the abyss-like hole, Ilea had to admit that Pierce had already improved.

Looking down, she saw dozens of dwarves, most of them rebuilding the destroyed sections near the pit. Others seemed to be preparing for a descent, some already flying or jumping down.

“Did you come here deliberately?” Verena asked. “To this world.”

Ilea glanced over. “No. I became a space mage much later.”

“Stranded, then?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. It couldn’t have been easy.”

“Look at her, she’s doing well enough,” Pierce said.

Ilea tapped the visor with her knuckles. “It was… a change, sure. But I’m glad it happened. There’s no magic where I’m from. And flying around with wings is just better than sitting in traffic. And no, I won’t explain what traffic is.”

“I can agree with flying being awesome,” Pierce said. “Not that I’ll be able to fly with this fucking thing.”

“The climb down will take a while,” Bralin said. “I can’t fly with this suit.”

“You’ll be fine,” Ilea said and raised her arm. She tried to lift him casually with her Space Manipulation and found his weight manageable.

“What are you doing?” he asked in a bewildered tone.

“Just checking,” Ilea said. “You’re a tough one, though. You’ll be fine.”

“Why not just put the armor into your storage?” Verena asked.

“And leave myself defenseless?” the dwarf asked.

Verena just glanced between him and Ilea.

“Right,” he said, making his armor vanish.

“You two can follow, I assume?” Ilea asked the Shades.

They both gave her a slight nod in confirmation.

“What are we waiting for, then?” Pierce said, walking forward and over the edge.

Ilea smiled and held on to the shoulder piece. She kept an eye on the others, seeing Bralin follow while shaking his head. The Shades followed

without hesitation, flying after them with their magic.

Ilea held her shirt down as it fluttered in the wind, her hair flowing upward. Verena held on, too, though she had fewer wind-related issues with her armor.

As they fell, Ilea raised her arm to adjust Bralin's flight trajectory but found him doing so himself with just his limbs.

Not his first jump, she thought, and she started laughing.

When they were about to reach the entrance area to the tomb, she spread her wings and used Space Manipulation to slow everyone down. The only one she couldn't quite grasp was Pierce in her massive war machine, but she knew the woman would be fine either way. She teleported the rest into the opening as they floated past, and then she formed a gate below Pierce.

The war machine was swallowed by the field and spat out again about fifty meters above them. Ilea focused her full attention on the chunk of falling metal, both hands raised as she guided the armored woman into the crevice on the wall.

"You like that ability a little too much," Pierce said.

Ilea landed on her shoulder again. "It's okay to feel envy."

"I have powerful spells, too. Just saying," the Dragonkiller said, likely more to herself than to Ilea.

"Sure you do," Ilea answered, patting her steel helmet. She started healing the woman's mind when she didn't reply.

"Very funny," Pierce said.

Ilea laughed, eliciting a hiss. "You're becoming more elvish."

"Back in the dungeon," Verena reminded them.

"Yeah, I'll shut up," Ilea said.

When they reached the collapsed section again, Ilea formed a gate for them to walk through. It felt more fitting than just teleporting them all, now that she could form the gates with a spell with a similar cooldown to Fabric Tear.

I'd envy me, too. These upgrades are so much fun. I love it.

"What kind of creatures did you fight here?" Bralin asked with bated breath.

"Bunch of undead," Ilea said. "Flesh Titans, Priests, Devourers…"

"Devourers? As in, more than one? They're four-mark beings…" the dwarf murmured.

Pierce walked ahead with the other women on her shoulders, followed by Bralin and then the Shades.

“What seemed to be the main grave was empty,” Ilea informed him. “Any clue as to who it might’ve contained?”

Bralin shook his head slowly. “No. But there are other tombs like this one in the pit. Most are just shut immediately. The Flesh Titans are… dangerous against most war machines. Devourers even more so. And escape from them is near impossible.”

“I assume one came up to the Pit?” Verena asked.

“Ages ago, yes. A group of fast war machines managed to escape, their regeneration enough to keep them alive for the duration of their flight. We caught it in a set of barriers after it killed three warriors. And the cannons ended it,” he recalled. “A glorious day it was.”

“Good thing they’re not the smartest creatures,” Ilea said.

“Most monsters aren’t,” he said. “Even I could likely do more damage to the Pit than the less powerful four-marks that find their way up.”

“You can plan and hide,” Pierce said. “Of course you’re more dangerous. Some of those things can be baited with a piece of bloody meat. Not much more than animals fueled by insane magical power.”

“How do you think I’ve killed so many?” Ilea asked with a smile, thinking back to the Bluetails.

They reached the cave with the temple-like structure and moved on, soon reaching the first collapsed section Verena had left behind on their retreat.

Ilea formed another portal for them to move through. The group stepped out on the other side and found a tunnel covered in molten steel shrapnel and the remains of several Soul Wardens. Some of them had limbs missing, others had been melted to near-unrecognizable chunks of metal.

“What unsightly beast haunts these caverns?” Pierce asked in a terrified voice from within her armor. She summoned her Warden blade into her hands, blue lightning flaring along its length.

Gotta admit, that looks cool, Ilea thought as she watched the sparks move. *Fire is still better, though. More of a classic.*

“You’re not wrong. Are you sure we should be here?” Bralin asked as he checked one of the machines.

Verena leaned forward a little. “It’s her. She killed them.”

“Oh…” the dwarf murmured, staring at the carnage for a few seconds.

Ilea formed her mantle before she jumped off and summoned her own war machine, Warden blade in hand.

“Lead us, then,” she said in a deep, booming voice, looking toward the Shadow-Touched.

They both bowed before they floated past her.

“Do you not want the metal?” Bralin asked as the group continued.

“Think it’s worth hanging on to?” Ilea asked, making one of the steel bodies float up with a raised hand.

“It’s an alloy, but I doubt anybody in the Pit has figured out its composition quite yet. You should show it to Goliath the next time you see him.”

“You can have these, I’m already holding on to a few,” she said, noting that he’d refrained from touching any of the metal. The remains of about sixty Soul Wardens resided within her space domain.

“Appreciate it. I’ll make a fortune,” Bralin said and started making the largest chunks vanish. “A generous god,” he whispered.

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FIFTY-SEVEN

Heavy

Ilea and her group of explorers soon passed the mind creature's cavern without incident. There were tracks left behind by various creatures, most notably the recent Soul Wardens. Eternal Huntress made the tracking quite simple, Ilea taking the lead as soon as she had identified the specific traces of soul magic that still marked the passing of the machines.

A crevice in the ground showed a passage leading farther down, with stone ridges jutting out from the sides, some broken off.

This is the way.

Ilea jumped down, her armor taking a few more pieces of rock with it as she passed. She landed with a heavy crash, her knees fighting against her own weight as she took in the area with her sword at the ready. Nothing within her dominion seemed of interest. She teleported out for a moment and found light at the end of another descent, this one more of a natural cave.

Pierce landed next. She stumbled and used her right arm to stabilize herself against the rock. Verena still rested on her shoulder. Bralin came down through the crevice with practiced ease. He slid more than landed, rock armor layered on top of his mostly steel suit.

"We are getting close," one of the Shades said as they arrived.

Ilea vanished back into her armor and went on toward the light. She stopped when the cave opened up. Once again, she teleported out and sat on her armaments' shoulders to see.

Before her spread an open area several kilometers in diameter, the ceiling distant and lined with stalactites. Dozens of small waterfalls broke forth from the walls and ceiling, the liquid luminescent, giving off blue light. The water wasn't quite enough to illuminate the entirety of the large cavern, but it was enough to give an idea of its expansive size.

Some of the waterfalls weren't broad enough to reach the ground, instead creating bright mists as the liquid dissipated during its long fall. A few basins had formed over the years with creeks flowing out and away, some slowing before ending in smaller pools, while others had managed to bore into the stone, leaving the cave to find another place to settle.

At the center of it all stood a square cube of dark steel, one edge buried in the ground and another nearly reaching the high ceiling. The light from the water created an illusion of movement on its smooth surface. Ilea wondered why its creators hadn't just put the thing flat on its side, but she supposed it did look more ominous this way.

Otherwise, it would've just been a cube. Now it's a geometrical marvel left behind by some ancient civilization. Though I guess just a metal cube would've been pretty ominous, too.

She made an effort to spot creatures in the vicinity, but other than a few harmless northern animals and monsters, she didn't find anything particularly dangerous. The place felt serene. Quiet. Steam rose from some of the pools. *Not all of them,* she realized as the others joined behind her.

"Quite a sight," Pierce said, walking forward before she made her machine vanish. She appeared above one of the steaming pools and fell inside, her armor disappearing as she splashed into the water.

"Very cautious," Bralin commented as he stepped next to Ilea's living armor.

Verena flew over and landed on the free shoulder. "It's surprising…" she said, tapping the metal.

"It's weirdly comfortable to sit on these," Ilea confirmed.

"It really is," Verena smiled.

Because it's essentially a walking tank? Or is it something else? Violence liked to sit on my shoulder, too. Something nice about it.

"This isn't nearly hot enough," Pierce said, pushing her wet hair aside as she looked out from the pool. "Verena, deary, I require some assistance."

A bath would actually be nice. How long has it been since I didn't just clean myself with ash?

Ilea made her armaments disappear and joined the others. “Feel free to join in,” she said to the remaining trio.

“Being in liquid is… disturbing,” one of the Shades said, cautiously floating closer to one of the pools.

The other one looked up at the falling water. “We will have to avoid it.”

“Not the most surprising thing I’ve seen today,” Bralin said. He walked over and made his armor and clothes vanish, leaving only a pair of black shorts. His beard meshed with his chest hair; in fact, the only parts of his skin without hair were old scars. He sighed as he lowered himself into the water.

Verena had removed her armor, though she still wore her fur loincloth, and used her flames to heat the water. She rested her head on the stone behind. Defined muscles and dozens of scars littered her body.

Ilea moved her mantle to cover her chest and waist, her Embered Heart helping with the temperature requirements. She didn’t go too far. Just because she enjoyed bathing in lava didn’t mean the others did too.

They were all above level three hundred, though, which meant they had at least some form of Heat Resistance. It was the most commonly used magic among humans, after all, and she assumed Bralin had had his fair share of fire-breathing encounters.

Pierce was naked.

She glanced at the dwarf and smiled. “Hmm, you really don’t like humans. I thought you were just pretending.”

Bralin sighed, relaxing as he opened one eye to look at her. “I’m not a fifteen-year-old lad, Dragonkiller. I know which battles I should fight, and which I should leave well alone.”

Ilea smiled. She summoned herself a meal and looked at the two Shades. They were still trying to avoid the water, huddling close together on a dry spot between three pools.

“I assume that’s the Soul Forge?”

They looked at her simultaneously. “Indeed. It resembles the notes of our source.”

“Who’s your source?” Pierce asked, cleaning herself with soap she had summoned. It gave off a faint woody smell.

“An ancestor who has since ascended,” one of them said.

“Ascended to what?” Ilea asked.

They glanced at each other and communicated for a few seconds. Then their floating forms turned back to her.

“A Young Shadow Elemental. Few ever reach this state, but they are held in high regard amongst our kind.”

“I can imagine,” Ilea mused. “Do they retain their ability to think and speak like you do?”

“Some do. Some do not. Choices are made upon each evolution. What is given is never unwanted,” the one on the left said.

“I’ve met a few Elementals myself, but none openly talked to me like you do,” she said. “But then again, I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting a Shadow Elemental yet.”

“You would be interested in meeting them?” Bralin asked.

“You wouldn’t?”

He considered the question for a few seconds. “I suppose seeing one would be impressive. But if you’re asking me if I want to meet a force of nature itself, then no. I’d rather stay down here and work on war machines.”

“They’re great trainers for resistances. Especially when you’re in the third tier already,” Ilea said, taking a few more bites.

“Please, let’s enjoy the quiet,” Verena said, her eyes closed, flames dancing on her skin above the water.

They all obliged, the four of them soaking in the heated bath of shimmering blue water. None of the nearby creatures disturbed them. Their instincts were keen enough for them to know not to approach the unknown monsters.

Ilea finished her meal in silence, glancing around at the others and the serene cavern. *I get why Khan Joggoth chose this spot for his Soul Forge.*

She sighed. *It’s still just so much fun to travel around and explore. And now I can teleport everyone back to the Meadow’s domain if things get dicey or if we’re done.*

Ilea thought back to her arrival here in Elos. Things had been exciting since then for sure, from meeting elves and exploring dungeons to becoming a Shadow. And now she was here, somewhere deep below the northern lands, looking to unravel the secrets of an ancient artifact.

Hmm. It feels less exciting than back then, I think. Makes sense, I guess. I’ve fought so many creatures, seen so many strange and interesting places, and I’ve grown a whole lot.

She looked at her hands in the water and smiled contentedly. Traveling with Elders of the Shadow's Hand, a war-machine-wielding dwarf, and two beings of shadow.

It was fun. And at the same time, Ilea felt a lot calmer than in recent years, a lot more grounded. Yes, there were the occasional surprises and brushes with death – things would be boring without those – but she was no longer scrambling to get her bearings or figure out this world. She had a pretty good idea of what she could do with her magic and her power. She had allies now, powerful and connected ones. And she had her space magic, so she could return to them whenever and wherever she wished.

It felt good. Different, she supposed. A part of her sometimes missed how she'd felt back when she was running through the forests near Riverwatch, or when she'd left everything behind to travel north, to explore that unknown frontier. But only the good parts.

Ilea enjoyed the soak for another twenty minutes before finally standing up, spreading her mantle as she teleported out. She increased the heat in her core, all the water still on her skin evaporating in seconds.

She found that where she was now felt *right*. It felt like she had finally settled into this new world.

"Shall we? Before more explorers make it all the way down here," she suggested to the others.

They all dried off and donned their armor. A mere half a minute later, war machines once more marched toward the metal cube towering over the many ponds below the Shining Caves.

Probably still part of the Shining Caves.

Ilea sat on Pierce's shoulder as she wanted to see the cube and everything around it. Her dominion's limited range wasn't quite enough for that. Not yet, anyway.

She spotted two Tuned Soul Wardens standing next to an absolutely massive double gate set within the steel. Dark metal stairs led up to the ten-meter-high entrance, the guardians outside unmoving and vigilant. The uninitiated may have mistaken them for statues. The surface of their armor was mostly smooth, their decorations and visors mostly cosmetic.

"Those are the high-level ones. Around seven fifty. They can teleport and have some kind of explosive death magic, which they can shoot at higher ranges from their back. Same swords, sadly," Ilea informed the others. "I can deal with them if you lot want to stand back."

“The strongest warriors are forged in battle,” Pierce said, lightning coursing through her sword and parts of her armor.

“In that case, I think I’ll get out the big guns too,” Bralin said. A moment later, his already solid war machine was replaced by a model twice the size. Thin indentations lined most of the silvery surface, stone forming within before it spread to cover most of his form.

A massive one-sided axe appeared in his hands. It was made of the same silver steel, runes lighting up as soon as the weapon touched his armored hands. Spikes of stone formed along the large axe head, that part alone about as massive as his armored chest.

Looking up at the towering figure of dark stone, Pierce whistled. A few bits of silver still showed beneath, runes brimming with dark red energy shimmering through the few remaining cracks. Horns of stone adorned his head, curving half a meter out and then forward.

Is that what the Trakorov Class would’ve made me? Ilea wondered as she smiled toward the dwarf. His eyes were barely visible behind the thin slits of his steel and stone visor.

“You three take the one on the right, then,” Ilea said as she jumped off the Elder’s shoulder. Her armaments appeared around her, the living set powering up with her heat and mana.

Bralin’s machine was bigger than even hers. *“Why not use that in the city?”* she asked.

He looked her way and gripped the steel handle of his axe. *“Only in the most dire of moments. Or when nobody’s watching.”*

Ilea smirked and turned back toward the Soul Forge. *“Didn’t know I was nobody.”*

“I suppose impressing a traveling goddess is also an acceptable reason to show off my most prized possession.”

“It will get damaged,” Verena said, her body bursting into flames as she flew off Pierce’s shoulder.

“A battle worthy of its presence, then.”

Bralin’s booming voice resounded through the cave, enhanced by several voice modules hidden somewhere in the stone. The ground shook when he took a step, sending ripples through the nearby pools.

“To battle, then,” Ilea added in her deep voice. “May we be victorious.”

Pierce raised her sword and started toward the metal cube.

* * *

Booming steps echoed through the Shining Caves. Animals and monsters rushed to safety as three armed and armored war machines made their way toward the downright alien object at the back of the cave.

The two guardians of the Soul Forge woke from their eternal slumber, mana flowing through their forms as soul and death magic hummed to life around their blades. Ilea couldn’t see them yet, but she could hear the familiar dull explosions of their long-range artillery.

One hand on her sword, she summoned a single large gate above their group, a second one aimed out and away. Heavy impacts thundered somewhere off to their right a second later. She moved into a light jog and soon saw the stairs within her dominion.

The Soul Wardens appeared closer and charged.

Ilea met them, Pierce close by with Bralin following behind. Her blade lit up with the Fires of Creation. She formed two gates to send the incoming death magic projectiles back where they’d come from. Her aura had already engulfed the beings, their teleportation subdued as long as they stayed in range. Her blade met that of her adversary, flames already spreading onto its form. Neither of them relented.

Two explosive impacts pushed her back, and acid-like death magic ate away at her shoulder as she pushed the being back with her Space Manipulation. A mist of burning ash engulfed its form. Her ashen limbs extended, and a charge of heat slammed into the machine’s left arm, the cannon on it burned away.

She failed to deflect the next blow, a deep slash leaving a furrow of molten steel on her chest. Ilea formed another gate in front of her, unable to move her sword quickly enough to block the coming strike. The machine attacked through the lightly shimmering space, only to hit its own back.

She slashed at it when the gates came down, but her heavy blows were expertly deflected by the enemy machine. A step back brought her out of range, so she held up a hand to slow the machine down. Another beam burned into its sword arm, slowly working through the thick, layered, magically infused metal.

Glancing to the side, Ilea saw Pierce had already taken a few hits. Her fancy armor showed five deep cuts, one as deep as her body. Her left arm hung on by a sizzling thread. Explosions of fire flashed over the second

Tuned Warden, Verena circling it and charging in with her flaming axes whenever an opening presented itself.

Bralin sprinted in from the side, and though his axe was blocked, his blow pushed the Warden back nearly ten meters. He managed to block the first of the Soul Warden's retaliating strikes, the next three cleaving out chunks of stone, one cutting into silver.

Ilea kept her flames going. She smiled and activated Primordial Shift. Her own armaments seemed to split and fracture within her perception. Her sword vanished into her domain, slowly raising both hands toward the Soul Warden. With her already increased weight and the armaments around her, Ilea didn't even attempt to move her body.

Flames lit up within her dominion, bright white light all around the enemy. She formed a sphere of burning flames between her hands and sent it into the struggling mound of steel. Its blade hit her armor but was blocked by something not quite flesh, not quite ethereal.

The sphere exploded. A wave of flame engulfed the thing, its hands pushed back as its sword was flung aside, half melted. It still stood, steel dripping to the scorched ground as its life was slowly eaten away. Ilea aimed her right palm at the melting remains and released Embered Heart infused with the Fires of Creation.

The beam formed within the fluctuating space, her own armaments melting slightly from the heat alone. White light eclipsed her perception as the energy flashed forward. When it waned, she saw the Warden's torso was gone, and what remained of its legs was no longer infused by soul and death. A ding rang in her mind as she looked at the cone of destruction she had left behind.

Ilea deactivated Primordial Shift, the space around her returning to normal as she summoned her blade. It lit up with fire. *That's one down,* she thought, and turned to the others.

Pierce had returned to her normal form, dark metal covering her body in a lithe design. She circled the Warden with Verena, their magic slowly wearing down its incredible defenses. The machine's main focus was on Bralin. Each of its strikes ripped out chunks of stone, but it never quite managed to hit any spot twice in quick succession.

Bralin took each step slowly and deliberately. He reformed the damaged parts of his enchanted armor and stayed defensive. For ten slashes of the Warden, he attacked once, only using openings he considered safe.

His axe managed to dig into the machine's steel, but he was mainly just pushing it away with his strength and massive weight. The cuts were too shallow to disable its arms or legs, but with the help of the Elders, they were making progress.

Ilea shifted her attention to her armaments, feeling them demand more mana. She allowed it, her movements slowing as she watched the changes. A few seconds passed, and dozens of magical explosions hit the remaining Warden. Burning axes cut into the back of its legs with increasing frequency, neither Elder stopping their assault.

A slit opened up in front of her. Ilea smiled. Now she could see the fight, not just perceive it in her sphere. She touched the new part with her mana, and it closed again.

Neat.

She opened it again and inspected the change to her left arm. It seemed to have formed a chamber and a barrel of sorts. She didn't understand the purpose until she filled it with burning ash. Extending her arm toward a nearby pool, she pushed the ash through the thin opening. A stream of flame came out, coating the water in white flame.

Not that I really need it, but I suppose I don't have to focus as much like this. And it's more fun.

Her new flamethrower add-on was certainly welcome, and as the last of the cuts in her armaments finally closed entirely, she saw a final change in her legs.

I wonder… Ash is the only thing that can reach that part.

Two limbs moved through her back and into the tubes leading to her heels. Tempered Seal hit the reinforced steel, heat charges forming until she released them a few seconds later. The stored energy escaped the only way it could: down and out of the steel feet. The resulting explosions propelled her upward, if only by the width of a hand.

Gotta charge those more.

She rolled her massive shoulders. The weight and size remained, but everything else felt a little more comfortable in small ways and definitely more receptive.

Living armor. I get why Bralin was so impressed with it. And I kind of feel bad that it's not even my main armor or form of battle. I get the feeling Goliath would find that amusing, though. I'll show him the changes either way. Fun to think I could just teleport there.

Space magic is fucking cool.

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FIFTY-EIGHT

Puzzle Masters

Ilea found herself relegated to an anti-teleportation magic item, so she moved on top of her armor and summoned a bottle of ale. She patted the massive helmet with a smile, glad it now had a visor to look through.

One that can be closed, so I can still use it purely defensively.

The flamethrower extension was really just a gimmick, but the jet boot addition made her curious. Her weight was downright ridiculous, especially when she factored in her heat generation.

And charging it with Tempered Seal will take a shit ton of mana and time. But it'll be interesting to find out how high I can jump.

Beams of lightning and burning axes slashed into the Warden, but its main focus was still the largest target in the vicinity, Bralin. His machine was now showing dozens of cuts below the regenerating layer of stone.

Yet the dwarf didn't seem to be bothered by any of it. He easily adjusted to the structural issues caused by the damage. He switched his stance a few times in the span of the next few minutes, still as defensive as he had been at the start.

Many of his machine's glowing runes were exposed now as he changed to a smaller weapon. A one-handed axe that still reached a ridiculous size, but it allowed him to use a shield in his other hand. The enchanted steel managed to deflect a few blows from the soul-magic-infused sword, but the shield was soon taking heavy damage too.

Ilea smiled as the magic around their enemy wavered. More spells hit its form, and she knew the fight was over. They had won.

The Soul Warden collapsed.

Verena landed on the falling war machine and struck down with her axes, a wild grin on her face. Pierce dropped down along her.

“Oh, that felt good,” Bralin exclaimed, both his weapons and his large machine vanishing. He returned to the same war machine he had used in the town before he created a perfectly even stone foundation on the ground.

The dwarf then proceeded to summon what seemed like an entire workshop. His massive machine came out first, with supportive structures that seemed measured specifically for the large beast. There were crates full of tools, industrial grinders, and even a furnace he assembled with a set of summoned chunks and his earth magic.

He checked the war machine and took note of all the cuts and dents. “Extensive…” he murmured before putting on a music box and getting to work.

And I can just heal my armor. Arcane healing really does seem like a shortcut to power and a life of leisure. Maybe the living armor helps.

Ilea sipped her ale and enjoyed the scene before her. *We didn’t even come here for the Soul Forge, whatever that thing even is,* she thought, glancing at the massive cube. *We came for one of the Taleen keys.*

She smiled to herself, very much enjoying the detour.

Pierce joined Bralin, one of her machine’s arms held in the other. She didn’t say a word and simply stood next to the portable smithy platform.

“I’ll do yours after,” he said without glancing her way. “Mind heating this thing up, Lilith? It takes at least half an hour otherwise.”

“Just like with Goliath,” she replied, sending heat into the forge compartments.

“A little less than that. You’re melting the forge.”

Verena had sat down on the destroyed Warden and was now eating a bowl of noodles while meditating.

“Should we check out the cube while they’re doing the repairs?” Ilea asked the two Shades, which had now moved a little closer.

“It will be heavily enchanted against foreign entities trying to enter,” one of them said, eyeing the downed machines warily.

“Do you know how to deal with that? I’m pretty good at destroying enchantments, but I don’t think we want to cause everything to self-

destruct.”

“Our research is incomplete. Already, we can sense more than was mentioned.”

Bralin finished pouring a silver alloy into one of the largest cuts in his armor before he glanced over. “I can have a look. I’ve seen my fair share of enchanted vaults and such. And the maker of this thing was a dwarf, too.”

“We’ll wait, then,” Ilea said and started floating around the massive cube with the Shades in tow.

There’s so much shit going on here, she thought, looking at the walls with her dominion. There were plenty of anti-space magic enchantments present. None she couldn’t bypass with some time, but considering the obvious paranoia of whoever made this thing, she refrained for now.

There might be detection spells inside, too, and they wanted to get in and find out what was there, not destroy the whole cavern. Based on the enmeshed bunches of explosion runes that felt reminiscent of Claire’s thrown stones, she didn’t think such a result was particularly unlikely.

* * *

A short time later, Bralin had finished his repairs and gotten Pierce’s machine to work as well.

“Your machine really took a hit,” Ilea said when she landed.

The dark blue war machine looked her way. “Scars of battle. Unlike your perfect living armor, mine has survived real combat.”

“Impressive. So, Bralin, what do you think of the defenses?”

Bralin studied the entrance to the Soul Forge for a few minutes, then shook his head. “Something is woven into this thing that I don’t understand. It’s not just conventional enchantments, though there are enough of those. After all this time, the power should’ve lessened, but it feels like this thing was set up just yesterday.”

“Soul magic,” Verena said. “Do you not feel it?”

Ilea walked a little closer. “There’s far too much different shit going on here,” she said. “But yeah, I suppose there’s some soul magic involved, too. I mean, it’s called the Soul Forge. So what’s to say I don’t just go past the space magic runes?”

“I don’t think that would work,” Bralin said. “Well, it would work, but while you might survive the aftermath, whatever is left inside won’t.”

Ilea crossed her arms. “So you’re telling me this is a vault I can’t actually crack?”

Pierce giggled within her armor.

“It seems that way,” Bralin surmised. “You’re a talented space and ash mage, but if you’re not hiding some high-level soul magic in there, I don’t think this will work.”

Ilea tapped her cheek. “High-level soul magic, you say…”

“You really want to bring her here?” Verena asked.

“If she wants to? And not just her, actually…” she murmured, setting her last available transfer marker. The one previously taken by the Krahen Isles.

Hmm, cooldown will take a few hours.

“Hey, Bralin, you wanted to meet Goliath, right?”

“Yes,” he said and looked up. “Why?”

“I think I’ll just take all of you. In case there are more Soul Wardens. We’ll return in about five hours. Care to join us?” she added, looking at the Shades.

“We would be honored,” the Shades said, knowing nothing about the destination.

“The trust of true believers,” Pierce said, giving them a mechanical thumbs-up. “Hey, you think Goliath could give me some cool upgrades for this suit?”

“Maybe if you ask nicely,” Ilea said. She knew the smith didn’t exactly enjoy *mundane* work.

She activated her third-tier Transfer.

“How far are we going, exactly?” Bralin asked. “Is this even sa—”

* * *

The fabric shifted, and the group appeared in the familiar lair of the Meadow.

“—fe?” Bralin finished his question and looked around.

“Great. Another group of mortals,” the Meadow said.

Ilea smiled and initiated telepathic contact. *“Indeed, old tree.”*

A whistling wind moved through the black grass in the vicinity. *“The child speaks. Humans do grow up quickly. Congratulations are in order, I suppose.”*

She laughed and bowed. *“Indeed, oh great Meadow. Speaking of which, I understand your pain with the god thing now. I really do.”*

“Do you, now? Well, I suppose even you could impress some dim-witted creatures of this realm. You have attained quite a powerful evolution, it seems. I can feel something… quite familiar.”

Bralin fell to his armored knees, raising his visor. “This is…”

“Ah, war machines,” Goliath said, holding a hand out to the kneeling dwarf.

Bralin stared at the Awakened with wide eyes, and Ilea saw tears rolling down his face. “I must’ve died,” he muttered. “Are you the maker?”

“No maker. That’s the Meadow over there,” Ilea said and pointed. “Also, you’re still alive, so don’t do anything stupid.”

“The p… pantheon of Elos…” the dwarf said, his voice shaking slightly.

Ilea noted the slight twinkle in his eyes. *“You know what you’re doing, old dwarf. Don’t add to my misery.”*

Bralin smiled and took the hand offered to him. “My apologies, Lilith. I couldn’t resist. And you must be Goliath, the flame-touched. I can feel your aura.”

“Are you not healing everyone here against his life drain?” Ilea asked the Meadow.

“Nobody here requires it. Have you lost an elf?” the tree asked.

“He’s fighting somewhere on his own. Got a little salty after he fought me. Not that it’ll be any better now that I’ve got my third evolution. Here, I’ll show you some cool stuff. Would be nice to have your opinion.”

“Ah, Ilea. I’m so proud of you. Come, then, and tell me about the things you learned in school!” said the ancient eldritch tree monster.

“I will. Speaking of losing people,” Ilea said, looking around, *“I haven’t seen Hereven in a while.”*

“Ah, yes. He’s decided to move to Hallowfort, to study and integrate into their society. It’s going… fairly well.”

“Well, they’re open to all kinds of beings. Probably better than trying to live in a human town. As long as he doesn’t start trying to create minions.”

“Definitely. And I’m keeping an eye on that. The people of Hallowfort are a lot more aware of mind magic than I believe the average human is, so that will certainly help.”

“Goliath, what do I have to sacrifice to get an upgrade to my armor?” Pierce asked, tapping her chest.

The smith just sighed and waved them over, Bralin following like an excited puppy.

"I'll go talk to Owl," Verena said, waving at the being currently floating around Aki's Pursuer form.

"How long until you're not the most powerful being here anymore?" Ilea asked with a glance at all the high-level creatures. She transferred over to the crystal tree, where the mana density was likely too much for anyone else besides the four-mark Lich and Aki – and maybe even them.

"You've already brought the Fae here, have you not?"

"Right." Ilea formed her three new elements. *"Actually, my evolution mentioned both you and the Fae, as well as a few others."*

Roots formed from thin air, flowing toward Ilea's small sphere of ice before they stopped.

Ilea smiled. *"Missing your friend?"*

"Not at all," the Meadow lied.

At least, she thought it was lying. Then again, the tree sometimes said it hadn't talked to the Elemental for hundreds of years, if not longer.

"Need a hug?" she asked, and she hugged the tree without waiting for an answer.

"You know," the Meadow said when she let go and stepped back, *"I do appreciate your human concern for me. Perhaps like a human has concern for their pet. But while the people here can be trusted, rumors already exist of our… involvement."*

"Us?" Ilea asked with a shocked expression. *"But you're into higher beings. I already fail the one thousand brain requirement."*

"I merely thirst for knowledge and the awakening of life to said knowledge. Know that this circumstance won't help your wish to remain mortal."

"I'm already functionally immortal, Meadow. Hey, look at this," she said, moving a piece of rock with her Space Manipulation. She smiled when the tree didn't respond immediately.

Just a teeny, tiny bit delayed. Thought I wouldn't notice, hmm? But I did.

"A gift. Not from me," it said finally. *"Be grateful. I believe that few have ever possessed this skill."*

"You do, though, right?"

“Yes. I do. But compared to you, it required centuries of study. Just be careful with it when other space magic or realm-connecting teleportation is active nearby. Someone with the capability but lacking underlying knowledge could cause… devastating complications,” it said, for once without its sarcastic tone.

“I appreciate the warning. Something like what happened in Erendar?”

“No. That was a controlled result based on all my capabilities. Your involvement could doom an entire continent.”

Ilea suddenly felt the weight of the floating stone a little more consciously.

“I’ll try not to interfere with anything major. What about this, then?” she said, forming the Fires of Creation.

A giggle went through the vicinity. *“Humanity keeps surprising me. Or, dare I say, life itself. To think a body born so bound to flesh could truly accept the flames of creation. Coupled with your element manipulation… well, I suppose if anybody could’ve accomplished such a feat, it would’ve been you.”*

“Give yourself some credit,” Ilea said, flicking the stone toward it. *“Some healing and earth magic were involved, too. And while the Fae is a powerful space mage, it’s not the Fae I trained with. It was you.”*

“Humility? From Lilith herself? Your growth seems not entirely limited to magic after all,” it said as another breath of wind moved through the vicinity.

It was a space magic trick Ilea had seen many times before. She raised her hand and tried to replicate it. She failed.

“I will teach you,” the Meadow said.

“And I will learn,” Ilea answered. *“I got more, too.”*

She activated Primordial Shift, and space itself writhed around her, flesh and flames moving in lazy patterns, in and out of existence. She could feel something pulling and pushing her, roots trying to grasp at her, chunks of stone vanishing just as they were about to reach her.

“Are you testing something?” she asked, deactivating the spell.

“Ilea. I believe you did it. You learned a spell no being I know of, nor I, could ever use.”

She twirled and bowed. *“I’m amazing. I know.”*

“If you understood but a fraction of what has just happened, your human brain would eat itself. I cannot grasp its entirety. It is… disproving

several long-standing theories. I would like to study it more, if you ever have time to show it to me."

Ilea raised her brows. *"Really? That crazy? Sure, happy to help with the first thing of use I can do for you. Other than physically moving you around, that is."*

"It is appreciated."

She showed off her gates too, but other than the restrictions being lifted, nothing about them was different in a major way.

"I encourage you to train your new manipulation spells," the Meadow told her. *"They should be the key to more options in the future, both for your spells and for your evolutions. Though I do not claim to know a being such as you. With this Primordial Shift you have shown me, anything could be possible."*

"I'll try to work on it. I could do that with you as well."

"I'm here, and you always have at least zero point three percent of my attention, you know that," it said in a loving voice.

"You're such a great friend, Meadow."

"Ah, many years it has been since I last saw the work of Eranur herself," Goliath exclaimed from his smithing area, the massive form of Bralin's high-quality war machine towering over the nearby forges.

"I'll be back for more training," Ilea said and cracked her neck. *"I'll probably borrow some of the residents for an afternoon. Enchantment puzzle. I'd take you, but, well…"*

"I have been looking into options, but so far, no satisfying conclusion has presented itself," the tree said. *"A long-range scrying spell would likely be best, but it's proving a difficult puzzle."*

"The only divination mage I know is Cless. You could ask Claire when she's here next."

"The required gates will soon be ready. Iana informs me that the contracts between Hallowfort and Ravenhall are still in the making. Once that is done, they will move on to the next stage."

"The next stage?" Ilea asked. She understood that the two cities would become entangled, but she didn't know exactly how.

"Yes. There are talks of an alliance. Beyond mere trade and space magic connection. You should be there, once these talks happen, as without you, none of it would have come to pass."

Ilea smiled. *"I'll be there."*

I guess that was always the plan. But now that we're getting closer, it does feel pretty surreal. Hallowfort and Ravenhall connected through teleportation gates… Who will join next?

She jumped to her feet and teleported to Bralin. "Can I borrow your music box thing for a while?"

The dwarf summoned it without looking at her, nodding as he watched a liquid sphere of metal float between Goliath's hands.

"Thanks," Ilea said, moving it toward herself and making it vanish. *"Meadow, can you make something like this that can store more than one piece of music on it?"*

"An intriguing toy. I will have a thousand looks," the Meadow said.

"Thanks," Ilea said as she dumped the Void Lord corpse on the ground. *"This might interest you, too."*

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FIFTY-NINE

Can We Get a Zoom on That?

The Meadow made the Void Lord's corpse vanish. *"Thanks for the meal. You have a personal spatial domain now, too, I see."*

"Oh yeah, forgot to mention it. Do you think it's safe?" Ilea asked.

"Safer than whatever else you're using."

"Good enough for me."

As she walked over to Verena and Owl, Ilea started moving the contents of her necklace and bracelet into her own spatial storage. The domain had a thousand units compared to the necklace's two fifty and the bracelet's one hundred.

More gifts to give away. Though these two have been with me for a long time. I'm glad my mana protected them, otherwise that necklace would've been disintegrated five hundred times over.

"Hey, Owl! You're getting used to the local characters, I hope? How've you been?"

"Greetings, Lilith," she said and bowed lightly.

I feel like that's the wrong way around.

"I feel… it goes up and down, but I'm trying to stay busy. There is a lot to learn… but most importantly, I feel welcome here. And no longer stuck, for better or worse. The Meadow has shown me the local environment. I do love the storms outside. And my magic… I can perceive a lot more than before."

She gave Ilea a curious look. “You…” she said, moving a little closer, one of her hands outstretched as if to touch her before she stepped back again.

“What is it?” Ilea asked, squinting one of her eyes.

“Your soul… it is…” Owl said and looked away, her eyes glowing a little brighter.

“You can see my soul? So you can see the fires of creation?”

The Lich nodded. “It’s quite beautiful.” Her hand twitched again.

“What do you want? You can touch it, if you want… if you make sure not to damage it.”

Verena gave her a look.

“Really?” Owl asked excitedly, moving a little closer again.

Ilea just smiled. *Definitely the right idea to have her ascend rather than Death.*

“Be careful, you might get burned. It should be fine with your level, though.”

The Lich didn’t have to be told twice, her eyes sparkling as she carefully pushed a hand into Ilea’s stomach.

Is this the weirdest thing that’s happened today?

Probably not.

If Isalthar knew how many things distract me from the search for the keys, I’m sure he’d be… I don’t know, actually. Would he mind? Maybe not. I’ve collected a bunch already, after all.

She refocused on the four-mark undead being going for her soul.

Owl’s hand was formed of some sort of matter, she could tell, but somehow the Lich bypassed her clothes and flesh. Her Soul Perception showed a purely magical presence, but nothing like a hand or fingers; it was more ethereal. An idea that caught on fire as soon as it entered the domain of her essence.

The Lich recoiled, withdrawing her hand, now burning with the white fires of creation. As she tried to shake it off, it started spreading on her arm. “Hot.”

“Do you need help?” Ilea asked, white flames flickering atop Owl’s clothes now.

Bizarre. That felt… nice, in a weird way. Intimate, I suppose. She did almost touch my soul.

“No… the damage is… manageable. I wish to… observe, and learn,” Owl said, nodding toward the Meadow.

“Seems like you’ve got an attentive student,” Ilea sent to the being.

“Indeed. There are many here, actually. Though not you and Pierce. She’s perhaps even more unreasonable than you are. Though I must be honest, you’re an enjoyable student. I’ve not had to solve a puzzle as difficult as teaching you since the first eclipse I witnessed on Erendar.”

“You know I gain another level for each insult you throw at me?” She smiled. *“No danger of her splitting again?”*

“No. I believe her assumptions were right. I’m not sure how it supposedly happened with Death, either. Without intention, at least.”

“Hmm. You’re saying he wanted to split again?”

“Maybe, though I’m no death magic expert. What I know is that Owl has already settled a lot since coming here. Physically and magically, I mean. She had recently ascended, but the longer she remains, the less likely or even possible a split like she has described to me would be.”

“That’s good to hear. Thanks for taking care of her.”

“I welcome any new addition who is curious and kind.”

Suddenly, Owl burst with bright purple energy, death magic flaring out in a sphere. Verena teleported away, but Ilea simply stood there, her hair and clothes pushed back as she felt her skin decay just a tiny bit. Her regeneration healed the damage before she could tell how bad it was.

“Oh no… I’m so sorry!” Owl exclaimed, crouching down to Ilea with both hands raised. The white flame on her arm was gone.

“Hey, you did it,” Ilea said. Looking around, she saw the Meadow’s barriers vanish. The creature had summoned a protective field in front of Verena. It had proven unnecessary, but Ilea couldn’t help but take comfort in its quick reaction. *“Thanks.”*

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“I… did… get rid of it, but my power flared up again,” the Lich said.

“Well, you’re a four-mark being. You wouldn’t normally have to be careful like that,” Ilea said.

As Verena joined them again, seemingly unbothered, the door to the enchanters’ workshop opened. Iana stepped out, her hair somewhat disheveled. She yawned and looked around.

“What’s the ruckus about?” she asked and rubbed her eyes.

“Good morning!” Ilea waved. “We found an ancient place called the Soul Forge. It’s mega enchanted. Soul, space, explosions, all sorts of fun stuff. For once, my sophisticated approach of punching it until it cracks open didn’t seem particularly reasonable.”

“Sounds interesting. When do we leave?” Iana asked, a cup of steaming tea appearing in her hand.

“We can leave whenever, but I’d like to be able to return here instantly in case something comes up, and the cooldown is still going. I need about four more hours.”

“Great.” Iana turned and went back inside, closing the door behind her.

“She hasn’t slept much,” Aki supplied from above. He was standing atop near-invisible fields of magic, jumping from side to side.

“I figured. You seem more comfortable,” Ilea said.

“He’s wonderful. Very athletic,” Owl said and clapped her hands. The gesture didn’t create any sound.

“One of the most dangerous machines at that level I’ve encountered so far,” Ilea said. “Think you’ll be able to protect the headquarters against a few thugs now?”

“Yes, although I’ll have to run on low efficiency. The mana density in Ravenhall is insufficient to power the abilities of this body,” Aki said, jumping down. “I will simply have to train here. But even getting back in won’t be easy. The Shadow Guard won’t exactly let me pass without questions.”

“Ah, right. I didn’t really think about that when I brought you here,” Ilea said. “I’m sure we’ll figure something out. Worst-case scenario, I can set a teleportation anchor within the headquarters.”

“Iana suggested a large box. I can make myself quite small,” said Aki, folding his bladed extensions and six legs in on themselves, creating what looked like a deployable drone.

Drop a few dozen of those onto a city, and it’s a wrap, Ilea thought. *It’s good the Taleen considered the elves their only enemy.*

“No way to get an energy core or something like that?”

“If that were such an easy task, more high-level beings would roam the Plains,” the Meadow supplied. *“At least Aki won’t experience pain while in his low-density form.”*

“What about you, Owl? Can you lower your density, or do you also require a shit ton of mana?”

“If I don’t use strong spells in quick succession, I should survive,” she answered. “For a few months, the Meadow thinks. I would be weakened, however. Pain shouldn’t be a concern, but it’s not a pleasant feeling. The Meadow simulated an area for me, and it felt… very wrong.”

“The curse of being a Greater Lich, I suppose.”

“You know, many do consider it a curse. A funny coincidence, I think.”

“Sorry to bring it up,” Ilea said.

“It’s not a worry, Lilith,” Owl answered. “I’m glad to be here, after all. There are a lot of things to learn and explore. And going to the south is not very high on the list. This Soul Forge you mentioned, however, maybe I can help with that. But know that my knowledge of death magic and the soul is more instinctual than based on theory. I am studying hard, but it will take time.”

“That makes two of us. We’ll leave in about four hours, then. I’ll work on some skills in the meantime.”

“Good luck!” the Lich said, giving her an ethereal thumbs-up.

“S… sure. To you as well,” Ilea said before she vanished.

“Did you just stutter?” the Meadow observed.

Ilea reappeared close to the tree, sitting down in the black grass and spreading her mantle. *“She reminds me of a friend from Earth. Very… energetic.”*

“Intriguing. So, what would you like to work on?”

“I have plenty of skills to enhance. The ones I’ve already enhanced are progressing steadily, and nothing new showed up from my third evolution, so I think I can go for a few more skill enhancements. With the upcoming dwarven war machine battles and who knows how many Soul Wardens still inside that cube, it’d be a waste not to get the skill levels for those fights.”

“It would merely be a temporary reduction in power. You did get your evolution. Can you enhance them all?”

“I have forty-nine points. Which means I can enhance nine skills. Do you have an idea as to how I can get easy Core Skill points?” Ilea asked. *“You could show me your most powerful spells.”*

“For such a simple purpose? The answer is no.”

“Up for some fighting after I enhance them? Might be possible to get a few levels despite your lack of murderous intent.”

“You know I’m always here to ground you.”

“Hah,” Ilea exclaimed. With that, she went through her skills.

Upgrades upgrades upgrades.

Strike, Dominion, and Brawling are the better remaining skills in Arcane Eternal.

And for Ashen Titan… well, nearly everything. Mantle, Core, Heart, Seal, and Embered Form. That's eight in total. And I guess Origin, because that one will take some time to level. That's already nine, though… and I kind of want to add at least Space Manipulation into the mix. And the Fires of Creation. Hmm.

I think Brawling and Embered Form can wait. Let's go.

'ding' Archon Strike [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1
Active: Archon Strike [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
Send a destructive pulse of mana into your enemy with every attack using your arms, fists, fingers, legs, feet, or head. Your Intelligence stat enhances the damage potential.
2nd stage: The amount of mana used per strike can be regulated with a maximum of 1000 mana per strike. You may charge each strike with 1000 mana per second to a maximum of 5000 mana.
3rd stage: You may choose to use Archon Strike as a non-intrusive attack, instead sending a wave of destructive healing onto your enemy. Due to the healing nature of Archon Strike, it partially ignores protection against mana intrusion. You may heal allies with Archon Strike. If used as a wave, the range of Archon Strike increases by 5.5m.
Category: Healing

Healing with punches. Yes. I mean, sure.

And I get more range on the wave form. Not exactly an overwhelming change for having to relevel it to thirty. But it's something.

It's going to take a while to get these back up to level thirty.

But this is the way to the elusive and mysterious fourth tier. No way around it, then.

'ding' Arcane Dominion [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1
Active: Arcane Dominion [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1
Perceive everything in a sphere around you while this skill is activated. The higher the level, the further the dominion reaches.

2nd stage: Arcane Dominion opens your senses to the arcane. A paramount skill both on and off the battlefield. Elements and spells you control within your dominion have increased harmony.
3rd stage: You may use Sentinel Reconstruction on all beings within your dominion. Your element manipulation skills are improved by a static 50% when used within your dominion.
Category: Aura – Perception Aura

Okay. Alright. That's a pretty big bonus. I do hope that applies to Space Manipulation too… hmm, why wouldn't it?

She could see the range of her dominion decrease with the level reduction. The ash she created, however, felt considerably stronger. Ilea sent some destructive mana into the Meadow.

"Done already?" it asked.

"No. I'll let you know when you can rip me apart."

She continued.

'ding' Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] reaches – 3rd lvl 1

Passive: Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
You have adapted the fighting style of the Azarinth school to something you now call your own. Damage inflicted with your own body and related skills is 95.5% [955%] higher. Your arms, fists, fingers, legs, and head deal a slight amount of arcane damage with each strike.
2nd stage: Getting used to fighting in close quarters, your reaction time is increased to accommodate your growing speed and control. Your bones are steeped with mana, increasing both their weight and resilience twofold.
3rd stage: Eternal Brawling consists of more than offense alone. A true brawler knows when to stand and let an enemy strike. You gain knowledge about injuries and damage sustained from incoming attacks as they happen. Each time you are hit by an incoming attack you see coming, the damage done to you by the being's skill decreases by 1.25%, up to a maximum of a static 20%.
Category: Body Enhancement – Arcane Magic

More damage reduction for prolonged battles. That'll help a lot against four-marks. Does the percentage rise with each level in the third tier?

She assumed the answer was yes, based on the uneven number.

'ding' Mantle of the Titan [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1
Active: Mantle of the Titan [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1
An armor of hardened ash protects you. Stronger than steel and forming to your will. The Mantle increases your resilience by 145.5% [1746%].
2nd stage: The strength of your resistance skills also benefit from Mantle of the Titan. The Mantle is a part of the Titan's body. It benefits from natural regeneration. You can feel through your Mantle, and you can heal it.
3rd stage: Increases the defensive capabilities of all ash and ember you control. Increase the ash used to form your mantle by up to a static 500%. The additional ash used requires conscious manipulation. You may use Mantle of the Titan to defend willing allies. The amount of ash required is dependent on the size of the target.
Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

A two hundred percent increase in the third tier? That nearly cancels out the fact that the resilience in itself dropped because of the level loss. And of course the main bonus… hmm. Shrouding allies in the mantle seems pretty good, but situational. Coupled with my healing, they'd be nearly as resilient as I am, though my main way to protect allies is still my space magic. More opportunity to help the Sentinels, perhaps?

Ilea wondered if her armaments or ashen copies were considered willing allies, too. A quick test confirmed that her living armor and ash could indeed be protected by her ashen armor now. Her armaments, however, required the entirety of her available mantle ash, and even then, the defensive layer remained quite thin.

Ash protecting more ash, Ilea thought, dissolving her armored copies. Two was the maximum she could make with her full mantle and limbs active at the same time. *Ash within ash within ash. Am I turning into some kind of caricature of myself? No. My ash is great. Next one!*

'ding' Titan Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1

Active: Titan Core [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
Ember glows within you, raising your resilience, speed, Strength, Intelligence and Dexterity by 55.5% [555%]. You learn how to generate and store heat within your Titan Core. This effect has a separate mana requirement.
2nd stage: The longer you fight with Titan Core active, the deeper its roots. Each minute of fighting adds 15% more power to the skill, up to a maximum of 150%.
3rd stage: Familiarity with the skill removes its upkeep. You can choose to increase your weight by 25% [250%] for each passing minute to a maximum of a static 750%, increasing your natural health regeneration, heat generation, and resilience by the same factor.
Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Hmm, two fifty instead of a hundred. And the cap was increased, too. Oh, and more resilience has been added to the bunch. Next.

'ding' Embered Heart [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1
Active: Embered Heart [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1
Increase the heat in your body and release it in a blast around you.
2nd stage: The embers run deep. The heat you may reach is only limited by your very life. Your resistance to heat held within your body is doubled.
3rd stage: Focus on release to change the blast into a cone of destruction sent out of either arm. You may store heat within any ash you control. The more ash used, the higher its potential to hold heat. Ash not connected to you releases its stored heat upon a strong impact in a blast around it or when you will it.
Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

What's the change, exactly? She summoned her notebook and flicked through the pages. *Here it is. Within* any *ash, that's new. And the last bit, 'when you will it'. Wait, does that mean…*

Ilea formed an ashen sphere about ten meters away and activated Embered Heart.

It's forming heat, she thought with a grin. *I no longer need to touch it at all! I can just charge it with heat. Coupled with my eyes and ability to*

control ash as far as I can see… and I don't need an impact anymore, so…

The sphere detonated in a violent explosion of heat and flame.

Oh… now this… this is wonderful.

The range at which she could form heat inside her ash was still somewhat limited, but a minefield of floating ash had just become a possibility. And with her increased weight limit and thus heat generation, her floating demon horde bombardment warship prototype had just become a lot more dangerous.

'ding' Tempered Seal [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1
Active: Tempered Seal [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1
Burn the inside of whatever your body hits with a surge of heat and embers, or release the attack in a burst of fire and cinders.
2nd stage: The flame burns on. Targets hit will have fire burning through or on them. Time and consecutive attacks will increase the effect. When using your arms, fists, fingers, legs, feet, or head, you gain the ability to send charges of heat within your enemies alongside the initial surge of heat and embers. Activate these charges to cause a violent explosion of fire within the affected targets. Can be activated three seconds after charge formation or until heat is lost.
3rd stage: Tempered Seal burns away all that stand against it, damaging the mana intrusion capabilities of defensive enchantments and both natural and manufactured armor. You may add heat to existing heat charges or form more. You may add a static 500 mana to a new or existing heat charge every second.
Category: Ashen Magic

More mana to charge, so essentially a straight damage increase. And it might help with my armaments' jet boot situation.

Now, let's see what happens to my third Class' skills…

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Domain

Ilea switched to her third Class and selected Fires of Creation.

All those collected Core Skill points gone in a few minutes. And it does feel kind of wrong to upgrade my space magic stuff so quickly after the evolution.

But here we are.

'ding' Fires of Creation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1
Active – Fires of Creation [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1
Let the fires erupt, burning away your health in exchange for devastating power. All of your spells and your body are infused with the Fires of Creation, if you so choose, dealing lingering damage to health, mana, and magical constructs. You are immune to stunning, fear, and shout abilities. Your resilience is increased by 60% [780%].
2nd stage: The pale flame settles within your core. The Fires of Creation now affect enemy health regeneration. This effect is higher for areas directly touched by the Fires of Creation.
3rd stage: Your experience with Fires of Creation allows you to infuse your magical constructs with its effects. For each level in the third tier, the skill's upkeep is reduced by a static 25 [750] points of health per second, and you may sacrifice an additional static 250 [7,500] points of health per second to enhance the skill's effects. The Fires of Creation

return 2.75% of all enemy health and mana burned away as long as the spell is active.
Category: Aura – Body Enhancement – Space Magic

Oh… that's a very good change, Ilea thought and laughed. *It'll be even harder to kill me now.*

"What did you unlock?" the Meadow asked.

"Health and mana steal with the Fires of Creation."

"Yeah. You're slowly growing into one of the most resilient things I've ever seen."

"That's the goal."

She went to upgrade her last skill with her remaining eight Core Skill points when another message popped up.

'ding' The following requirements have been met. Has reached level 500 in three Classes as a human. Has enhanced a total of at least fifteen Class skills with a minimum of one skill in each Class.
Additional options have been unlocked

Core Skill points available: 9
[3rd-tier Class Skill Point]
[Stat Gain]
[Skill Boost]
[Add Class Modifier]
[Skill Enhancement]
[Locked]
[Derivative General Skill]
[Locked]

Oh? What's that?

[Add Class Modifier] – [Add a random additional Class modifier to an existing Class – Cost: 10]

As in, like, a universal body enhancement bonus or something? Damn… that's pretty fucking good. Well, it would be if it wasn't random. Could be a

bonus to Flesh Magic, or maybe just a stat bonus. Who knows?

"I just got the ability to get additional Class modifiers with Core points."

"I see. How much does it cost?" the Meadow asked.

"Ten points, and it adds a random bonus."

"Good. Though I suggest you focus on enhancements first."

"I think so too. With it being random, it might even be worth investing in stat points instead. Ten points is quite a lot."

As she enhanced the last skill on her list, another thought struck her.

But an additional Class bonus could be insanely good, too. Like literally becoming an immortal.

'ding' Space Manipulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1
Passive – Space Manipulation [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1
You have learned to see and manipulate the ever-present spatial fabric. You gain the ability to move anything within the fabric with a mere gesture.
2nd stage: Further understanding of the spatial fabric allows you to manipulate its forces with greater ease and higher intensity. You learn to perceive even the tiniest ripples in space. In the case of active fissures, you find yourself able to peer through to the other side. You gain the ability to anchor a spatial pocket to your very essence. Storage increases with the skill's level.
3rd stage: You have peered through the fabric of space itself and have learned to unravel its intricate structure. You gain the ability to perceive and differentiate magical frameworks, as well as manipulate them within your space without failure. Charge simple manipulation attempts with up to 250 [3,500] points of mana. Charge is limited to a static 500 mana per second. You learn how to damage existing frameworks. Results may vary.
Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic

A charge, hmm? Only for simple attempts. I'll test that out thoroughly.

"Alright, I think that's it," she said, standing up. *"Three Core points left, and a whole lot of new things to figure out. You don't mind if I throw a bunch of stuff at you, right?"*

"You're not quite at the level of power where I would notice," the Meadow informed her.

“Because you’re a healer, too,” she said with a smile.

Bursting into white flame, she charged Archon Strike, then switched into a stance and punched the air in front of her. A wave of white-turquoise energy burst from her fist, sizzling the black grass before it washed over the crystal trunk of the tree.

She repeated the spell, this time without her flames. The wave of blue arcane energy flowed past the being.

“Now you can heal with your punches. Why am I not surprised?” the Meadow said.

Ilea smiled. *“I can use kicks, too.”*

Her lava, earth, and ice magic formed above her palm, the elements glowing noticeably brighter in her magic perception.

The new dominion bonus is good for these as well, she thought as she moved the spheres with her Space Manipulation. Her control felt smooth, even though her space skill had been reset to the first level in the third tier.

It’s definitely affected by the new bonus, but the skill took a pretty hard hit from the reset.

She charged her Space Manipulation with a sizable amount of mana before she tried to do something with it. Moving the elemental spheres with the charged power didn’t seem to work, so she considered the possibilities.

I think I could use it to crush the tree… not that it would even notice. A push or pull seems possible, too. Moving the spheres is too nuanced for a charged use.

Ilea decided to try a push and held up her palm toward the Meadow. A gust of wind flowed past the creature, or so it seemed, until the stone wall around sixty meters behind it shook slightly. Ilea blinked. She had seen the wave of space magic within her dominion.

“How very forceful. Little nuance in that use,” the Meadow said.

“Did you fucking see that?” Ilea asked, a smile blooming on her face.

“Yes. I suppose someone who enjoys punching a lot would enjoy such a barbaric approach to space magic.”

“Exactly.”

The charge-up does take a while. But the skill will level up. Now I want to get back to fighting stuff. Hmm. This enhancement business reminds me of my early forays into skill leveling.

She formed another bunch of lava, ice, and earth spheres and tested her charged manipulation a little more. The description’s caveat of ‘simple’

limited her use quite a bit, but considering the power involved, she couldn't really see it working any other way.

The wave of space magic she had summoned worked in various variations. She could send it from above to crush anything below, from the side to sweep enemies off their feet, or even from the ground up. She tried forming invisible spears or spheres with the magic but failed to keep them contained; the effect simply ended up being a smaller wave.

A strong pull or push focused on frameworks in a certain space worked too, but she couldn't choose exactly what to hit with the charged power. So she simply pulled or pushed everything in the affected area. Compared to the wave, the damaging aspect was much lower, but she assumed it could be used to throw even a large monster off balance.

The last use she tested was what she immediately named the fruit press. It was the only way she could use her charged Space Manipulation in a focused manner against a single framework or even a smaller part of one.

The word 'focused' was being used very liberally. Anything around it would *likely* not be affected, but the spell's chaotic, overcharged nature simply squeezed something from all around. At some point, something gave.

So far, she had only tested it against her own creations, but she could imagine what it would do to a living creature. It was really quite horrific, even for her. She couldn't wait to use it in battle.

"At what point do I talk to you about ethics and the corruption that comes with power?" the Meadow asked.

"When I name myself Empress of Mankind and start to eradicate entire species of Awakened beings," Ilea answered.

She formed her mantle with the full five additional layers.

Hmm. My ash capacity rose with the dominion buff, too. That's helpful.

With the full mantle on her, she hardly qualified for light or even medium armor. Her speed wasn't reduced in a major way, however, especially with her wings.

I'm starting to get why all these ancient creatures go on about density.

She activated the third tier of Titan Core as she floated down to the ground, her weight increasing quickly.

Heat charge is good, weight increases faster. The spell is, indeed, gooder than before, she thought with a smile. A test, perhaps, to see if the Meadow could read her mind, but the obvious groan didn't come.

“What?” the being said.

She squinted at it.

“I’m ready to level some skills,” Ilea said, removing all her armor save for her ash mantle, ashen wisps moving through her hair to make a single braid. White flames formed on her body as she jumped back, wings spreading out. *“Show me your power, Guardian of Erendar.”*

“A title I have not heard in a long time, Lilith, immortal of ash. Let us see, then, if you are ready to become my equal.”

As the tree answered her, a dome-like barrier thrummed to life in a fifty-meter radius. Hundreds of wooden projectiles formed around it, the ground shaking as the domain’s very foundations shifted. Ilea crouched and readied herself as she watched the magic pulse, the fabric of space torn and bent. She grinned as she sensed a part of her ally’s true power.

More than it’s ever shown before.

She stood in the domain of the Endless Meadow.

* * *

Verena turned her head when she felt the barrier magic spring to life. It was a surge of magic unlike anything she had felt before. Parts of her told her to run, others to go and fight. Her rational mind kept her standing where she was, eyes open and senses pushed to their limits. Her magic had activated, a feeble attempt to stand against the overwhelming power she felt from the barrier.

Few situations in recent years had made her remember her youth, when she’d had little to no power. When a simple level twenty Wisp had caused panic and fear to bloom in her heart. Audur came to mind, but the dragon hadn’t taken them seriously. It hadn’t been out for blood. Not until the very end.

This felt different. Every hair on her body stood up, the very air charged like lightning.

The Meadow had always been an incredible creature to her, incomprehensible really, but peaceful, an ally and friend to Ilea. Perhaps its amicable demeanor and the attitude of an all-knowing teacher it liked to assume had blinded her to its true nature. Verena had known; she had seen some of what it knew. She had failed to identify the being, and yet until this very moment, she had not truly understood.

The others reacted similarly; all work and conversation ceased as they looked toward the shimmering dome of energy. Within floated the winged form of Ilea, clad in white fire and ash, facing a creature with such immense mana and power that it felt like they were looking at a god.

The world held its breath for but a moment, Ilea's form floating ten meters above the ground, her wings rising and falling. Then burning ash spread inside the barrier and a beam of near-white light cut into floating stone walls, one broken before the next blocked the power entirely. Hundreds of projectiles, both wood and stone, surrounded Ilea before they all sped her way.

Verena wondered for a moment why she didn't teleport away, but there simply was no space to move to. Something would hit her everywhere within the barrier. She walked closer to get a better look, her curiosity winning out against any instinct suggesting danger.

They had seen the dragonling elf try his luck against the tree, always close to getting in a good claw strike or fire breath, always deflected or blocked at the last moment.

That thing was just playing around. Maybe even now…

In the next moment, shimmering space formed around the floating figure made of flame. Spears, splinters, drill-like stone projectiles all lashed into her, but the flow wasn't right. There were no impacts, not on her. Instead, the things hit each other, hundreds of stone pieces exploding into fine dust as they collided with wooden spears.

Verena didn't blink. And then the world froze. The sea of chaos stood still in the very air within the barrier, and then it all vanished. She felt sweat on her forehead.

Ilea raised her arm, the shimmers gone as a pulsing beam of energy formed on her palm. This time, it didn't impact any walls but vanished. Wisps of clinging white flame revealed a previously invisible gate in front of the crystal tree, one that had swallowed the spell. The beam came out ten meters above it, flying toward Ilea. Again, it vanished.

"What the fuck is happening?" Pierce said as she and a wide-eyed Bralin joined Verena.

"Quiet," Verena whispered. Her eyes and head moved constantly as she followed the beam, gates opening and closing over the next few seconds, closer and closer to the respective beings themselves. In the end, the light

only appeared for a fraction of a second before finally burning into the barrier itself. Small cracks showed for but a moment.

And it's whole again. The fires… she thought when they died out.

"Their control is marvelous…" Owl said in a whisper.

Aren't you supposed to be the four-mark being here? Verena thought, but she didn't take her eyes off the battle.

A familiar aura entered her perception.

"Hmm… I felt something above. Did someone challenge the Endless Meadow?" Lucas asked, his voice carrying the same calm it always did. "Wait… that's Ilea?"

Stone walls now flew through the arena. Dozens of them, all at least two by two meters in size and flying at ridiculous speeds. Verena strained her abilities to keep up with everything. She pushed her auras to their limits, her health now burning, but it was worth it. She raised her brows as a soft presence touched her, and she glanced at the tree. The Meadow was healing her, even while it was fighting Ilea.

Ilea spun and moved through the air with increasing speed. Each wall slid past with only centimeters to spare, some of them vanishing and appearing nearby, others shattering against the barrier or the black grass. She teleported, just once, forming gates around herself and occasionally sending waves of her arcane power or heat at the moving walls to change their course slightly.

Each impact boomed like thunder, but the ground didn't shake, and the barrier didn't waver. Even so, it felt like the sound was dulled, not representing the forces unleashed within the domain of their battle.

Not a battle, Verena thought. *A lesson.*

And yet it didn't quite feel like the two were teacher and pupil. Perhaps friends, both interested in a certain game or style of fighting. Verena smiled, remembering her early adventuring teams. She had met some of them again years or even decades later. Some had wanted to test themselves against her. The results had never been in question, set in stone from the very start, but she had respected the sentiment. The joy. The thrill.

"Don't go in there," Pierce said next to her.

The Meadow has set up a barrier. None of us could ever get inside. Foolish Elder, she thought with a broadening grin.

Much like with her old teammates, the result here was clear from the beginning. She watched the unending walls of stone, watched as Ilea tried

to get closer to the Meadow. She managed another teleport, but not as far as Verena knew she could move. Another meter. Then she slipped up. The edge of a wall struck her shoulder, and chaos followed.

Bralin groaned and raised both steel hands above his helmet. “Fuck…”

Pierce smiled, and so did Verena.

The barrage of stone didn’t stop when Ilea was struck. In the moment she was off balance, about three dozen walls hit her floating form. Most creatures Verena had seen and fought would’ve been turned to paste by the second or third wall. But Ilea didn’t really fit into what she had come to expect. While her offensive power was something Verena envied, her resilience was something entirely different.

Stone broke against her burning form, her limbs whipped to one side or the other, and flames and ash were ripped away as a cloud of debris formed around her. Then, as fast as the chaos had begun, it passed again. The dance resumed, Ilea’s form flying between the walls as she continued her approach toward the tree.

Verena could’ve sworn she saw one of her arms snap back from an angle that looked entirely wrong. It wasn’t the recovery that surprised her. It was the fact that she was not only alive, but well enough to continue without pause.

“She did just get hit, right? Or did I dream that?” Pierce asked.

“She did,” Bralin said. “About three dozen times. I thought she liked the armor because of the plating… doesn’t look like that anymore.”

Lucas chuckled and sat down on a set of growing roots.

“Anybody up for some bets?” Pierce asked.

“Ten gold says that she doesn’t reach the tree,” Bralin said.

“That’s stupid. She doesn’t stand a chance. I say she gets to ten meters,” Pierce said.

“Twelve,” the dwarf answered.

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SIXTY-ONE

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Interesting, that one, Ilea thought as she tried to decipher the next puzzle around her. The walls were merely a distraction to keep her on her toes while she not only defended against the powerful space magic attacks aimed at her head and wings but also attempted to solve the field of magic coming from below. Anti-teleportation, as usual. And yet the training had never quite been this intense. Nor this difficult.

Feels like the tree is respecting me more. And I appreciate it.

Instead of forming small runed circles below her on a whim, the Meadow had made the entire dome its playing field, with the tree at its center. The claustrophobic feeling that gripped Ilea's heart was nothing other than the overwhelming presence of charging space magic. All within the circle.

And every time she managed to teleport, the entire thing shifted, losing just a bit of its gathered power. Without her enhanced Space Manipulation, she wouldn't have known exactly what was happening, but it felt the same as when she'd tried charging her own space magic.

Her skull cracked under the pressure of a dozen focused strikes. All her defenses and third-tier Space Magic Resistance kept her alive, the damage healed in moments. She didn't know exactly what the runic circle was building to, but she knew she would lose if it activated before she reached the tree.

The Meadow remained quiet. It watched her, she knew, from all around. That knowledge alone, coupled with her spatial perception, nearly made her shiver. It was one thing to know, rationally, that the being was not only her ally but also a good friend. It was something else entirely to believe any of those thoughts when reality itself was moving in from all around, her death slowly charging up from below.

The field of burning ash Ilea had laid onto the ground wasn't burning through the regenerating stone fast enough, the runes below invisible but thrumming within the fabric. Her skills kept her focused, as did the healing power in her mind and body, the experience of all her battles, and skills like Veteran and Primordial Flesh. All worked together, and it still wasn't enough.

Still, she had felt the same way when she first set eyes on the Sand Elemental down in the Descent. Something entirely beyond her comprehension, beyond anything a human could ever face or understand. And still she had moved forward.

She had faced the corrupted creature back then, and she faced this being now. She felt the fear, but her hands were steady. She was injured, but her body healed. She was pushed back, but resisted.

Again, she slipped, her chest crushed and her head nearly squished. A last-ditch effort to push back against the overwhelming fabric manipulation with her childish attempt at spatial control saved her consciousness. Her brain remained undamaged as stone slammed into her form.

The impacts felt dulled, her resilience, armor, and Earth Magic Resistance working in tandem with her healing. Her flesh was bruised, and a few of her organs had been destroyed, unable to resist the powerful blows. She smirked and transferred. Another four meters closer, more than she had managed last time.

Her injuries healed quickly with both her third-tier healing, the new absorption from her flames, and her regeneration. Advancing, she met a wall of space magic. Arcane power infused with the Fires of Creation lashed out, burning ash spread from her body, and a beam of energy slashed into the invisible force, letting her slip through the fabric with a twist of her body.

The walls struck again, this time pushing her down toward the ground. Though her wings were destroyed and reformed several times, her spine resisted the heavy impacts. A push of charged manipulation deflected a

single wall and interrupted the series of impacts. Ilea broke through and fought the ongoing grip the Meadow had on her form.

Each passing minute added to her defenses, Primordial Flesh, Titan Core, and Eternal Brawling working together to make her more resilient. The formation clicked in her mind, and she saw an opening in the torn fabric around her. Transfer activated and pushed her through. Again, the formation below lost a tiny bit of power, but it was too late.

Ilea was ten meters from the tree when a strange spell activated all around her. All the stone walls stopped instantly, the air itself locked in place. Her vision went as dark as if someone had flicked off the lights. She couldn’t breathe.

Her dominion was the only thing that informed her that she was, in fact, still in the same place. She perceived the stone, the ground, the Meadow, the magical light of the barrier. The power she felt from the ground reminded her of the battle in Erendar, the warring four-marks, and the Wyrm on the Krahen Isles.

While the sheer might of the spell was overwhelming, it was the calm of it all that frightened her the most. There were no explosions, no heat, no sudden pressure increase from the being’s space magic.

It was just still.

Quiet.

As if the world had stopped.

Someone without Space Manipulation and Arcane Dominion might’ve thought the magic time related, or perhaps dimensional, the rules of this realm shifted to something different. None of that was the case. Ilea knew that all the spell was doing was amplifying the Meadow’s control over the fabric and all that lay within.

She could no longer move, as the being did not permit it. Her flames were extinguished, as they were not allowed to exist. Her ash was dissolved. None of it happened instantly, as her healing and resistances worked against the magic, but it was meaningless. She was merely a single framework inside a space of total control.

She watched as the ash was willed away from her right arm, the flesh beneath it separating as if cut perfectly by ten thousand blades. No blood flowed out from the pieces that slowly floated away from her still body, her form hanging in the frozen air.

Ilea felt the pressure build now, felt her head about to cave in, but then her perception slowed. She couldn't teleport, her ability not even close to anything that could break through this field. Audur's aura was a flimsy wooden box compared to this prison of perfect space. Her healing kept her alive, but it remained inconsequential against the manipulation of her very form. The only thing she had left to try was to break the very rules that bound her to this reality.

She activated Primordial Shift, and she grinned when her head didn't burst. She still couldn't breathe as the very air was locked in place. Nor could she move, every piece of reality around her a solid wall. But she found the Meadow's control slip past her writhing form, as if she had escaped the fabric itself. And perhaps that was exactly what she did. Ilea didn't know; she couldn't, as both the Meadow's magic circle and her own ability were far beyond what she could truly comprehend.

It was the instinctual reaction of a being blessed with power. Trapped by a hunter who knew every aspect of their tools, every intricate interaction of their runes, every weakness of their enemy. She had become the monster, so many of which she had killed before. A monster with one last card to play, only delaying the inevitable. For when the hunter understood her spell, the fight was over.

And so they remained, locked in place. Ilea's mana and health dwindled with the exponential cost of Primordial Shift, but everything she absorbed kept her alive. She wouldn't last much longer, but while she couldn't understand the intricacies of the Meadow's spell, she could grasp the mana used to keep it active. In the end, the circle lost out, and as the stone projectiles began to move again, Ilea took a deep breath.

'ding' You have resisted the Runic Circle of Absolute Control – 1 Core Skill point awarded

Primordial Shift ended, and Ilea returned to the fabric. She spread her wings and floated backward, watching as the stone around her dissipated.

Is it out of mana?

The thought was dismissed when she saw a forest of roots grow below her.

"Well done. Truly an extraordinary skill, coupled with all of your other abilities," the Meadow said. *"Know that even four-marks have failed to*

escape that runic circle."

"Thanks. It was… humbling to see. I appreciate you showing me one of your fourth-tier spells," Ilea answered, lacking her usual sarcastic tone for once.

A giggle floated through the dome. *"That was no fourth-tier spell, Ilea. But I suppose it might be equivalent to one."*

Ilea floated over the growing roots, her body once more healed and covered in burning ash. *"So you developed this runic circle? You're telling me that Claire or Iana could set up that spell, too?"*

"Set up, yes, perhaps. However, they lack the mana to activate it, nor do they have the ability to control it even remotely. Neither do you, for that matter. Not yet." The Meadow paused. *"Do you require a break?"*

"My mana is pretty low. Let me get some of yours," she replied, forming a layer of burning ash that spread down onto the wood. She smiled. *"Do* you *need a break?"*

"I use runes because they require less mana than fourth-tier spells. At a similar power, that is."

Ilea raised her brows. *"Meaning you know rune combinations more powerful than your fourth-tier spells?"*

"Keep growing, and you might find out," the being said in an amused tone.

"I'll get there, Meadow. You know I will," Ilea said, letting herself fall into the burning roots. That way, she wouldn't have to wait until the Meadow had filled the entire bloody dome with wood. She released a sphere of Embered Heart as she landed, the flames pushing away the wood for a split second before it fell back into place.

All of this feels different. The evolutions… all three of them. And now the enhancements. The Meadow is no longer playing around. Hmm… and that feels good. Not just my growth, but the thrill of it. I'm no longer exploiting weaknesses or simply outlasting some ancient monster… I'm getting close to fighting back, toe to toe.

"Meadow, I'm wondering. Could you still kill me in an instant with one of your higher-level spells?" she asked, dodging through the field of roots, a set of ten wooden arms gripping her legs before she was pulled down. Ilea increased her weight and burned away the wood close to her. She summoned her armaments and formed a mantle of burning ash around them.

“I have thought about that myself. Before your new evolution, I was fairly certain. Now, it’s difficult to say. There are many things that enter the health vs damage calculation, and you’re incredibly elusive. It’s fair to say that, if there is no need to end the battle quickly, I would likely use a less impressive method to kill you.”

Ilea smiled. *“To think that even the great Meadow can’t instantly wipe me from existence.”*

“The chance of my success remains fairly high. It is merely not certain anymore.”

She grinned. *“Exactly.”*

She wasn’t even thinking of the Meadow. She trusted the being with her life. Who she was thinking of now were Audur, the Ascended that had faced her, and the Monarch of Verleyna. She wasn’t there yet, no, but she was catching up. Quickly.

* * *

Verena watched them spar for a little longer. Ilea was now wearing her flaming armaments to counter the wood creator’s magic. Beams and spheres of flame cut through everything as she was struck by spears and roots, her armor ripped apart and regenerating a hundred times over.

The pressure from before was gone, though the barrier remained. A good thing, too, as its perimeter often stopped errant beams of flame within.

“She mentioned you were here,” Verena said, turning around to face Lucas. “I haven’t heard from you in years.”

He raised his hands and smiled. “Yes. Hmm. Well, I thought… if I stayed away for long enough, you’d get someone else to become an Elder.”

She rubbed her temples and sighed. “I was worried.”

His eyes softened a little before he looked down. “I… apologize.”

Verena shook her head. “Have you kept up your training, at least?”

Lucas didn’t reply.

She sat down next to him and watched the burning forest, maniacal laughter resounding dully within the barrier as several logs crashed against the stumbling armor.

“Make sure to inform the Meadow from now on. About your whereabouts,” she said.

“I will,” he answered after a while.

“How long until we leave again?” Pierce asked, looking over.

“She said a few hours,” Verena said.

“Feel like visiting Hallowfort? I don’t really feel like working on my skills while that monster is training nearby,” Pierce said.

Verena looked at her for a few seconds before she stood up. “Sure. A bit of normalcy for once. You should come too, Lucas. When was the last time you ate a normal meal?”

“Light and water is plenty of sustenance,” he murmured, acting like an old man as usual.

And you were supposed to be the strongest, Verena thought, gently touching his shoulder. She looked toward the dome and smiled. *Maybe we should’ve founded a council long ago, instead of clinging to our ways. I guess Adam’s betrayal acted as a catalyst.*

“Meadow, can you send us up to the town?” Pierce asked.

“Certainly, lightning child,” the being replied to the three of them.

Verena felt the space magic manifest, but compared to Ilea’s spells, she had no chance of resisting.

I want to face that creature at one point or another. Maybe now, with Lilith and the Council, I’ll be able to focus on myself a little more.

They appeared in the town made of stone set atop the ancient statue, the Meadow’s domain now somewhere far below.

“At this point, this might be the safest settlement in all of Elos,” Pierce said as she looked around.

“Indeed. With the Endless Meadow watching over us,” Lucas said.

“You almost sound reverent,” Verena said.

“I’m growing older, Verena, and while some youglings like Ilea might push past anything we once thought possible, I do feel my own limitations more and more. I’m glad she brought the being back. And I’m glad that they’re on our side.”

“Which side is that?” Pierce asked.

“The side of those who are free.”

Verena smiled, then walked to a nearby Awakened. “Greetings, glaive master. Where may we find food and drink?”

* * *

Ilea stored her armor before it fell apart entirely, her mantle soon pierced by a dozen wooden lances. Her weight was at its peak, Embered Heart and Archon Strike keeping the encroaching forest at bay, at least a little. It was one thing to face the Meadow's space magic, but the forest was something else entirely. Its sheer mass and durability made it unconquerable for her. At least for now.

"Stop playing around. I want to actually test how viable this is compared to evasion."

The ground shook, and the crystal light from above vanished a moment later.

Ilea sighed and loosed one last Embered Heart before magic slammed into her from all sides. Her mantle held for a while, but the first injuries soon manifested. The problem, just like the many times before, wasn't the actual damage done by the piercing roots but the fact that they prevented her from healing her organs. She couldn't exactly reform her heart around a wooden stake. The joke wasn't lost on her either.

Compared to the last few times, however, the Meadow couldn't get through her defenses as quickly. Which allowed her to use her spells more often. Destroying the wood helped, but it felt like using a bucket of water to fight a forest fire. And that was after her evolutions. Before that, it had been a tiny water gun.

She ignored the amount of blood and fleshy bits in the meat grinder, her pain nonexistent, no blow able to faze or stun her.

"This reminds me of the vampire I killed," she sent as Primordial Shift activated. She healed herself fully and deactivated the spell again. Unlike Phaseshift, the Meadow failed to fill her unoccupied place in the fabric entirely with wood or stone, which made the whole affair a little more interesting than an instantaneous loss.

"Maybe we should work on removing your brain permanently. You would be unstoppable," the Meadow sent.

Gates formed around her, the nearby roots vanishing into the pyramid she had erected around herself. The Meadow countered with its own gates, sneaking roots behind the portals without much trouble.

"I don't know if you want a zombie Ilea running free."

"Just another dangerous monster in the wilderness."

Ilea crossed her arms before her mantle was shredded again, her skin and muscles slowly bored through by rotating spikes. A sphere of near-

white energy burned away some of the wood again, her injuries healing almost instantly.

"Come on, give me some credit. Ever seen a monster with regeneration this ridiculous? Arcane healing, mana intrusion, ash mantle, space magic, flame of creation?"

"Just another very *dangerous monster in the wilderness, then. Or would you like a special title?"*

"Lilith is plenty, I think. But I'd probably be seen as some demon or goddess. Now that I think about it, maybe zombie me would actually go around healing things."

"It is said that Lilith appears on cloudless days, when the winds come from the east. Offerings of food will calm her. All those brought to her with illness and injury will be healed."

"Not bad. But if you attack her…"

"Her rampage usually lasts several weeks, until she either kills everything in an area of fifty kilometers or she feels hungry," the Meadow finished.

"So I'm some kind of natural catastrophe type monster you really shouldn't mess with. I can get behind that, I suppose," Ilea said with a smile. *"Could've even happened with some of my evolution options."*

"You value your consciousness too much for that to happen."

"Yeah. Who knows, though? Maybe in ten thousand years."

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SIXTY-TWO

Lockpicking Mages

Ilea cracked her neck, ripping out the last few spears stuck in her chest before she threw them aside. *"Thanks, darling,"* she said, smiling at the tree as the last few liters of blood flowed down her body and into the black grass.

"Of course, Lilith. Whatever it is you require."

She looked at the ground. *"Do you actually drink that?"*

"What do you mean? Is that not the pact we made? Your blood for my endless knowledge?" the tree asked. *"Many children will be born from your sacrifice."*

"You know I never know when you're joking about shit like that," Ilea said as she stretched.

"I do use it to feed certain beings in the area, those that are unable to sustain themselves from time to time. I assumed you wouldn't mind."

"I don't. Donating blood is important. Happy to give some flesh too, if it helps."

"I didn't know you could shed."

Ilea rolled her eyes before she checked her notifications.

'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 10
'ding' Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6
'ding' Arcane Dominion [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Embered Heart [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Fires of Creation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 12
‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 23
‘ding’ Monstrous reaches lvl 6
‘ding’ Telepathy reaches lvl 2
‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 6
‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 8
‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9
‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2

“That one circle did more damage in moments than this entire forest has for the past few hours.”

Ilea summoned her armaments and healed the heavy damage they had sustained.

“Sorry, buddy,” she said, tapping the living armor. She glanced at the tree. *“I did wonder, can living armor actually awaken? Like, develop its own essence, conscience, mana, or whatever else is necessary?”*

“That does seem unlikely, though having seen your Primordial Shift, I wouldn’t be surprised if you found a way.”

“Breaker of reality and all, eh?”

“Quite infuriatingly so, yes,” the Meadow sighed.

“Says the eldritch being,” Ilea retorted.

“Just because you fail to comprehend something doesn’t mean it’s incomprehensible. Your spells are the same, but while I might make sense of it someday, you will already have new abilities.”

The being sounded tired, annoyed, and excited at the same time.

Ilea smiled and walked toward the others. *“And that’s why you like me. New puzzles.”*

The Meadow sent a wave of space magic past her. Perhaps the equivalent of waving her off.

“We’re leaving, everyone,” she said. Monster Hunter made her voice and intent travel through the spacious cavern. “Where are the Elders?”

“Verena says they’ll be ready to leave in five minutes,” the Meadow supplied. *“Dragonkiller Pierce is currently locked in a high-stakes card*

game. It appears most of her accumulated wealth is in the pool. I estimate her chance of winning at around two percent."

"Just don't let her murder everyone when she loses."

Ilea smiled at Owl, then she raised a finger to her cheek and teleported to the smith.

"Ah… before I forget. Goliath, I have something for you. Maybe you can use it to improve my armaments. Also thought this might be useful to Kyrian once he's back."

She summoned all the Soul Warden machines and half the swords she had taken from them.

"Those in particular might be interesting to him, or at least whatever enchantment or power is within them. I can even use the flame of creation with the blades."

A few of the blades and two machines vanished instantly. *"Rent,"* the Meadow said.

"Rent?" Ilea repeated.

The smith didn't react, wholly focused on taking in the heap of metal. "I will do as you suggest, mother of ash."

"Mother of ash?" Ilea asked, but she shook her head before he could answer. "Forget it. I'll let Kyrian know about it."

She focused on his mark and sent a message. *"New metal at Meadow's. Check with Goliath whenever. Hugs, Lilith."*

"Thanks. Will check later. Don't hug anyone with your strength," the metal mage sent back.

I can be careful, Ilea thought. *Maybe I should give him a charged fruit press hug next time we meet.*

She tapped her lower lip before she moved over to the gathered group. As they had before, the Shades bowed as she approached, not a word spoken.

"Please stop with the bowing," she said to only them before she glanced around. "Do you want to come as well?" she added, looking at Aki.

The Pursuer jumped down from the wall and landed in a low crouch, the motion smooth, before his bladed arms molded themselves into rapiers. "There is much I have yet to learn."

"Sure, but you can continue afterward. I doubt we'll be there for long. And you might get some actual combat experience."

“If you think it reasonable, and that I shall not be a burden, I accept,” Aki said and bowed lightly.

“You never were, nor will you ever be, a burden,” she said, then raised her arms. “Field trip time!”

A few moments later, Iana and Christopher joined them.

“High Enchantress, good morning,” Aki said.

“Morning, Aki. Ilea, why do you have to shout like that?” the woman asked, rubbing her eyes.

“I forgot you were sleeping. My apologies, High Enchantress,” Ilea said.

“You’d better apologize,” Iana said.

How did she sleep through the entire battle before? Ilea wondered. *Noise-canceling enchantments, probably. But Monster Hunter got through?*

“Is it fair to assume that an outside party would consider this group… strange?” Owl asked, glancing between the beings.

As she spoke, Bralin rejoined them, nearly skipping. “Strange doesn’t even come close, Greater Lich. I’m nearly certain I’m dreaming, or dead.”

“Your essence is untouched and healthy, young dwarf,” Owl said in a joyous voice.

He nodded while taking in a deep breath. “Wonderful. Yes. Thank you.”

“Uncursed and blessed with youth,” Ilea said.

“You shut it, goddess,” the dwarf said. “Wait… what…?”

“Hmm?” Ilea asked, tilting her head a little to the side.

He looked at her and squinted. “I just got a level in Veteran.”

She laughed. “It is indeed very brave of you to offend me, fool.”

Three Elders of the Shadow’s Hand appeared nearby, perhaps the most normal-looking people in the group. From a human perspective, at the very least.

“Noooo! The next draw would’ve—” Pierce babbled, her face red as she stepped over to Verena and grabbed her shoulder. “A small loan, please! I can’t leave like this!”

The Berserker stared back before she burst into flames.

Pierce held on for a few seconds, then stepped back. She gave Lucas a glance, then reconsidered, turning instead to Ilea before she vanished and reappeared right in front of her.

Ilea displaced the woman as far away as she could and clapped her hands. “You made it. Lucas, do you want to join as well?”

“I will return to my work. I’m sure that… whatever this endeavor may be… this group is more than suitable,” he said as he looked around at the beings.

“Probably, yes,” Ilea said. Then, to the Meadow, she added, *“I’ll bring the kids back later.”*

“Don’t lose any of them. You’ll be the one responsible,” the Meadow reminded her.

“Of course, Meadow. But if I don’t get some practice in, how will I ever become a guardian of reality like yourself?”

She activated her third-tier teleportation, connecting everyone except for Lucas. Then the fabric shifted, and a moment later, they stood once more in the Shining Caves. This time, they had reinforcements to take on the Soul Forge’s field of defensive enchantments.

“Wow… it’s beautiful!” Iana exclaimed.

She and Christopher carefully approached the cube, magic flowing through them. Aki moved up into the air and checked the perimeter, two void cannons at the ready. The others spread out slowly, Bralin and the Elders preparing for battle.

“Owl, care to take a look as well?” Iana said, looking back at the Lich.

Ilea and Owl approached together, the two Shades staying farther back.

“First impressions?” Ilea asked as she sat down on the stairs, summoning a meal into her hands.

Christopher smiled. “It’s good that you came and got us before fiddling with any of this. It’s quite… extensive.”

“Comparable to some of the more complex meshes the Meadow showed us,” Iana said as they got to work. “It’s just that this one is nowhere near as stable. Any wrong tampering will set it off. Exciting!”

Ilea watched the enchanters work. They wore armor that looked similar to their previous sets but was most certainly enhanced in some ways. She assumed the Awakened smith was responsible; either he’d offered his services to them during her time in the north, or they’d managed to trade something for some enhancements.

The main thing she noticed was the calm both of them showed. There was not a speck of fear on their faces, despite the dangerous magic they were about to play with. Nor were they overwhelmed by excitement.

I guess that’s what spending time with the Meadow does to someone. Or being in the north, around all those strange and powerful beings.

She smiled as she watched the group, all of them with their own magic, tools, and armor. It almost felt like an expedition.

Workbenches covered in tools, large books, and a single empty sheet of thick paper were soon spread out before the enchanters, Iana coordinating the others as they started deciphering runes and enchantment layers.

Ilea finished her meal and spread her wings, floating over them to get a better look at the growing puzzle of symbols she didn't understand.

"I don't think I've ever seen someone decipher runes so quickly," Verena said, the woman flying next to her.

"You understand any of it?" Ilea asked.

"Some. I learned about basic and advanced rune combinations when I became a Shadow. The more common systems are quite useful in ruins both in and beyond the human Plains. A lot of traps can be disabled with some understanding and the right documentation."

"I prefer to just trigger them."

"It's been a while since I used them, too. I assume most enchantments or rune traps that could actually hurt me will use languages I never learned. They don't seem to be as limited in their knowledge."

"How complex are we talking? Is learning about advanced runes comparable to learning another language?"

Verena looked at her and smiled ever so slightly. "And here I thought *I* had neglected my education."

"That actually hurts a little," Ilea answered.

"I'm sure you'll survive. And no, there are far more runes in a single system than most languages will ever need letters. And as far as I understand it, runes can be linked and expanded with no theoretical limit. You'd need to be exceptionally talented, exceptionally hard working, and have exceptional teachers to even come close to what this group is doing here."

Looking at the connections drawn before her, Ilea could believe as much. There were already a few hundred, various sections marked and comments added.

"I assume the more you add, the more unstable it gets?"

"Essentially, yes. The margin for error just gets larger. And I believe it becomes exponential with certain combinations," the Elder explained. "The same is true for the mana required to activate certain fields. Many

devastating rituals are known to powerful people all around the Plains, but few of them could ever actually activate one."

"So the Meadow is pretty much working with perfect precision when it sets up those circles." *And it puts them down basically instantly. I guess that while it* is *a four-mark, its true power may lie in its knowledge of runes.* "Blood magic can substitute the energy needed. I saw it in Baralia."

"Yes. Life, essence, mana. Heat can work, too. Each form requires alterations." Verena sighed, looking up toward the ceiling. "Not my favorite topic, to be honest."

"You seem to know it quite well," Ilea said, crossing her arms.

"Easy to learn a few words in a new language. But something like this requires perfect fluency in more than a few languages."

So they're monsters like me, she thought with a smile. *Just with knowledge instead of levels.*

They watched the group work for another ten minutes until they stopped sketching.

Iana sighed and looked at Christopher. "This won't be an easy one to crack."

The others joined them at the main workbench.

"Owl, I need you to confirm a few things," Christopher said and motioned to the being. "Can you help me levitate?"

"I can make a flying copy," Ilea said, but the Lich had already grabbed the significantly smaller enchanter.

Iana gave them a look for a second but then returned her attention to the mesh they had drawn.

"Alright. Whoever set this up knew what they were doing. And they most certainly didn't want anyone getting inside without their permission."

"Is it possible at all?" Bralin asked. "There are vaults in the Pit I deem pretty much unbreakable."

"Enchantments aren't living beings. They're static. Once you have physical access, there is a way through. Practically speaking… neither Christopher nor I could get in there. I doubt even the Meadow could do it, not without triggering at least a few of the defensive measures."

"If the Meadow couldn't do it…" Ilea murmured.

"The Meadow would know how to get in, but without a high-level soul mage and enough heat to melt steel, it wouldn't get much farther than anybody here alone," Iana explained.

“Let me guess, there are lightning magic seals, too,” Pierce said from within her repaired war machine.

Iana glanced at her. “No. Nothing for Aki either, I’m afraid. But just because we have the tools doesn’t mean it will be easy. You’re an earth mage, right?” she asked, looking at Bralin.

“Yes. The name’s Bralin,” he said.

“Great. Bralin. I take it you’ve broken into sealed-off areas before?”

Owl landed again with Christopher in tow, the man adding a few more notes before they flew up again.

The dwarf glanced at everyone. “I don’t think I need to lie here. So yes.”

“Perfect. How precise can you be with your stone magic?”

“I build and repair war machines. So precise enough,” he said in a confident tone. “How extensive are we talking?”

Iana grinned. “The whole thing.”

He looked up at the cube and mirrored her expression. “That’s a piece of work.”

“So we’d better get working, then,” the enchantress said as Owl landed again.

“Just a few complications, but we should be fine,” Christopher said as he added the notes. “Are we using Ilea’s ash? Or will we have the Meadow set up sheets based on our measurements?”

“Bralin will provide the setup.” She looked around at the others. “By way of explanation, we have to build a cover to mark the specific areas where each problematic enchantment has to be disabled. Christopher and I will prepare foci for each enchantment, and then we’ll just have to time everyone’s magic perfectly to crack this thing in the span of about a third of a second. Well, when I say everyone, I mean mostly Ilea and Owl.”

They’ve got a plan. And we have the tools.

She smiled to herself. *We don’t even know what we’ll find in there, but it feels like everyone wants to crack this box open. A fun activity for a field trip.*

Ilea looked at the Lich and gave her a nod. “Maybe we should work on our coordination for a while.”

“We’re going to need powerful attacks from the both of you. Train with that in mind,” Iana said as she summoned another sheet of paper, followed by a few tools.

Christopher opened a notebook and started reading out some measurements, Iana following with a pen in real time.

“Professionals all around,” Bralin said. He summoned his own tools and nodded to Pierce. “Care to fly me around this thing? Always good to triple-check the measurements.”

“Ask Verena. I need a bath after I lost all my gold,” Pierce said and vanished into one of the basins.

“I can take you,” Aki said from above, stepping down with a few fluid movements.

Bralin took a step back, both arms raised. “Ah… Oh. Sorry. I haven’t seen a Praetorian in a long time.”

“I’m a Pursuer. It’s a far more dangerous model,” Aki supplied. His blades morphed into long-fingered hands. “Ready?”

Bralin glanced at Ilea and raised an eyebrow.

“He only *sometimes* loses control and kills allies,” she said with a thumbs-up.

Bralin sighed and gave the machine a nod.

“Do you have any remaining information that may be important?” Verena asked, looking at the two Shades.

“We have already shared all with the enchanters,” one of them said.

“Direct observation is beyond the information passed down to us,” the other added.

“Great. We’ll be working on our coordination. Let us know when you’re done,” Ilea said and began to move her wings.

Owl followed.

“You’re pretty quick with that hover,” Ilea said when they had gone a few hundred meters away.

“The acceleration is difficult to control. It is far more powerful than it was before the ritual,” Owl said and closed her fist. “A gift from Pain and Death.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No. It’s a comforting thought, I think,” Owl said, then looked at Ilea with glowing eyes. “Shall we?”

Ilea smiled and charged up her heat.

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SIXTY-THREE

Coordination

Ilea and Owl soon came to the conclusion that using telepathy was far superior to speaking for coordinating. It was an easy thing to convince Owl to add a bit of resistance and skill training to their session. They had to get used to each other's magics and speeds, after all.

Beams of soul and death magic burned into Ilea, the former occasionally paused to make sure her essence didn't take too much damage. The Lich was struck by waves of arcane healing, beams of charged heat, and ashen spears.

Ilea looked inward with her Soul Perception to see flames moving around the central sphere-like form she couldn't focus on. The fires were there even when the skill wasn't active, both protecting her from foreign influence and shielding her against attacks.

She learned that the defense wasn't absolute, especially against a four-mark being like Owl. After enough hits and subsequent pauses, Ilea learned that the damage repaired itself faster than before her evolution.

I wonder what makes a soul stronger. Is it just specific skills? General level? Age? Wisdom? Will?

"So, how do you like it near Hallowfort?" Ilea asked. "Are you settling in?"

Owl paused her attacks for a moment. "I think that will take more time. But I feel comfortable with the beings who are there, yes."

“Any plans for the future yet?” Ilea asked, letting more magic flow over her.

“Not yet. Though I’ve been cooped up for so long, I think I desire some travel or exploration. With my power, I could maybe even help out here and there. That was the initial goal, you see. And while we failed to save our town, there are many others out there who would need assistance.”

“I like that… a benevolent four-mark Lich. You should have an easy time against any creature with a soul, which means adventuring work should suit you quite well,” Ilea said as a burst of death magic washed over her ash, destroying a few layers before they healed and reformed.

The Lich flew around her, not used to her increased mobility. “The Meadow has said similar things. I will be careful.”

“Speaking of the Meadow, have you seen its soul?”

“I get an idea of it when I look at the being, but to see it fully is beyond me. I believe there is something similar in place to your flames. More abstract, however. Confusing to me. I couldn’t even grasp at its soul if I wanted to.”

Another few spells struck Ilea. Her Death Magic Resistance was already at the end of the second tier, but the Lich needed someone to practice with anyway. And she could level plenty of her other skills this way. She formed a few ashen spheres in the air around her, heat gathering within her before she sent them flying toward the being.

Near-white explosions of heat and fire spread out from the fast-moving spheres, the Lich teleporting to avoid the blasts. Ilea displaced the last two spheres and made them explode right behind the creature. Owl was rocked forward, the back of her ethereal form covered in flames, and she hissed in an unpleasant, low-pitched tone.

“That hiss sounded interesting,” Ilea said, a few dozen spheres now floating around her.

Owl continued the hiss for a moment before a blast of death magic flared out around her, Ilea’s flames sputtering out against the impressive field of magic.

“It is merely the pain… or should I say, the unpleasantness of having one’s very form burned.”

“Do you have resistances anyway?”

“Yes,” the Lich said, floating around Ilea with apprehensive eyes, her gaze darting between the many projectiles hanging in the air around the

continuously burning Ilea. “Not very high-level. Ice and heat in the second tier, the rest below. Not many of the creatures Death caught could even damage us.”

“But you do have General Skills. I suppose you classify as an Awakened, or maybe whatever species you were before… or are you just a Lich? How many Classes do you have?” Ilea asked out of curiosity. “Oh… let me know if you want to keep those things to yourself. I know people generally dislike sharing information regarding their magic.”

The Greater Lich waved her off. “Death thought like that, yes. I don’t see the value in such a philosophy. Let me see… I have one Class, ten skills.”

“One Class… I wonder. How many resources and stats do you have? I have about eighteen hundred Vitality, with various buffs that come out at nearly seventy thousand health points.”

“Oh. I see. Surprising… hmm… my Vitality and health…” Owl’s voice trailed off, and she looked to the ground.

“You don’t want to share?” Ilea asked with a grin.

“No… it’s just…” she said, fidgeting with her hands.

“I’m just interested. Because I haven’t ever asked something as high-level as you.”

Owl looked up. “My health is… a bit above five hundred thousand.”

“Oh,” Ilea got out. “That’s a lot.”

Hmm. No wonder it takes me so many spells to kill a four-mark.

“Physical damage I take is halved… and from most magical attacks, a part of it only damages my mana. It’s kind of a part of me.” Owl looked at her hands again. “Ah, yes, I have nearly eight hundred thousand mana,” she added, seemingly conflicted between embarrassment and pride.

Ilea whistled. “Damn. Not bad. I’m just above a hundred thousand. But I guess it’s to be expected from someone at your level. How else would you cast your fourth-tier spells?”

“Ah, I don’t have one of those,” Owl said, smiling with the purple line on her ethereal face that passed for a mouth. “The Meadow said I would get one at some point if I get better with the ones I have. But they use up a lot of mana anyway. Thousands for each spell.”

“Hmm… I can hit for that much, too. Mana-wise, that is, I’m sure our various bonuses are different,” Ilea said.

Does that mean I hit as hard as some four-marks, then? I mean, one strike powered with all my skills should take between a few thousand and nearly ten thousand. That feels right. I've faced and killed plenty of creatures in that realm of power. Though they vary a lot, admittedly.

Even Owl, given what she's just told me. She's got a lot of resources, but compared to my recent fight with the Meadow… I just feel… confident that I could take her in a fight. Sure, her magic is strong, and she's got a ton of health, but her experience is lacking, and while she might have a lot of health and mana, what happens when she uses up a lot? I regenerate and heal and absorb.

I guess that's the difference between a human who's worked her way up from level one and a four-mark being like Owl. I'm behind in terms of straight-up health and mana, but I know that will change as I level.

"How quickly do you recover your health and mana?" Ilea asked. It felt like a nice opportunity, and compared to a few years ago when an answer would've mostly just deflated her, now it felt more like inspiration.

"Health takes quite some time. I still haven't regenerated the damage from your flames before. Mana is okay down here, but it's faster near the Meadow, or in the City of Glass."

"Mana density, I assume?"

"That's what the Meadow says, yes. Another reason why it's dangerous for me to go to low-mana areas. My regeneration would be slowed a lot."

"Makes sense."

Will I have that problem too at some point? But I started as a classless human and basically level zero. I could survive even without mana. Maybe that's just what everything else has built on?

She hoped her body wouldn't start to require ambient mana. She could already absorb some with Sentinel Core, but the amount didn't make much difference given her overall high regen.

I might even outpace Owl.

"I haven't really seen a four-mark monster run out of mana before," Ilea said.

Owl nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! I wondered that too, because apparently, many lower-level beings have to be careful with their magic. The Meadow said that once I get a fourth-tier skill, it will cost a lot to use! Here in this area, I might run out at some point… if we continue for a long while. But in my old dungeon, I don't think that could have happened."

“The absorption,” Ilea nodded.

So that’s why it always feels like they never run out of mana. I’m starting to understand what makes me so special, as a human past level five hundred. Most four-marks are beings of their environment, whereas I’m kind of an anomaly.

In terms of killing them, transporting four-marks back to the Plains should be a pretty viable way to hunt them down, then. Always seemed like a dangerous thing, but the discomfort they’d experience from the low mana and lack of absorption would likely cripple them.

No wonder the dragons and other high-level creatures of Elos haven’t annihilated humanity already. It’s not just a matter of their philosophy, effort, and will. It also leaves them vulnerable.

“I like your ash and your flames,” Owl said. “You use them so easily! I wish I could make up combinations like that with my magic.”

Ilea smiled at her. “I’m sure you’ll get there too. Just keep using your magic.”

“I’ll try my best,” Owl said with a smile, a sphere of vibrating death magic forming between her hands.

Ilea shook her head ever so slightly as the beam pushed her a few steps back and shaved her mantle away.

She doesn’t even understand what kind of insane magic she’s wielding.

Her eyes opened wide when she realized she was the one who had just survived Owl’s attack easily, her own spells following the Lich now, explosions of energy and white flame pushing her away.

I should hang out with normal people again sometime.

She thought about the dinner she’d had with Willa’s parents. Normal humans. Which was exactly what she was too. Definitely. Most certainly.

Either way. I’m having fun.

Owl and Ilea worked for another hour to train their magic and learn to synchronize their spells.

“You might be a good partner to train with the Sentinels,” Ilea said as they flew back to the cube. According to Verena’s flare signal, the preparations were done. “Once you’re a little better at tuning your spells. They’d get killed in a single blast otherwise.”

“Oh, that may be interesting. They’re all healers like you, aren’t they? With ash and all?”

“Mostly,” Ilea answered. “And your magic types aren’t exactly the most common. Well, I’ve run into death magic many times, but I think that’s just my luck – or misfortune.”

“Will they be able to visit now that the gates are done?”

Ilea smiled as she checked her messages. “Soon, I imagine.”

‘ding’ Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Titan Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 24
‘ding’ Soul Perception reaches lvl 12
‘ding’ Teaching reaches lvl 9
‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17
‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18

Starting back up on those third tiers.

“Will they not think me…?” Owl said and paused.

“Think you… what? An undead horror beyond comprehension?”

“I wouldn’t have said it that way.”

“Sorry. And don’t worry. They’ll think you’re cool,” Ilea said. “Not sure about some people, but I’m pretty sure the Sentinels will like you.”

“I hope so.”

They reached the cube and found it almost entirely covered in stone. It was more or less smooth with dozens of markings scratched in. Steel plates, glass spheres, various gems, and mirrors had all been placed above or within the added layer.

“Alright, everyone’s here, then,” Iana said. “Owl, Ilea, familiarize yourselves with the marked sections. We’ve noted the various elements you’ll have to use and how.”

Ilea floated around the cube, her dominion picking up every marked section, each with its own set of instructions. She would have to use arcane, space, and heat magic. Verena would help with the latter, but a circle at the center of one of the cube’s faces was specifically marked for her beam.

“How long are we talking, exactly?” Ilea asked.

“Everything needs to happen within one point four seconds. That is, if the first eighteen enchantments are destroyed simultaneously. Otherwise,

we’re working with zero point six seconds. Based on everything we see and understand. In case something goes wrong or anything in the mesh causes a chain reaction, I suggest you get us out of there as fast as you can.”

Ilea checked the sections carefully. “And how will I know if something goes wrong?”

“You’ll know,” Iana answered.

I don’t think you understand how many high-level spells I’ve seen.

She didn’t voice the thought, though, assuming that if any defensive measures got activated at all, their intrusion had failed.

“This won’t be easy…” Ilea said, setting up large ash spheres that hovered in the air around the cube. Each changed into a symbol related to the magic they had to use. “Owl, what do you think?”

The Lich was still floating around the cube. “I can hit everything on this side,” she said, then teleported, “and here. That still leaves three enchantments that I won’t be able to reach with my teleportation in time.”

Ilea used Fabric Tear to move her. “Seems to work fine. So where exactly do I have to put you?”

Owl floated into position and aimed. “Here is good.”

“Verena?” Ilea asked.

“I’ll need one teleport to here,” Verena replied, floating on the other side of the cube.

Ilea spent a few more minutes setting up her spheres, moving them close to where the impacts had to happen. She could feel the location of her ash, knew the form it took. She also added spheres to the teleport locations where she would have to put her two teammates after their first two barrages.

“Is just a wave of space magic fine?”

“Yes,” Iana said. “Just enough to disturb the fields in place. For you, it won’t be a lot.”

“I see,” Ilea said, finishing her setup. “Let’s try a few times without spells.”

“And let’s do it like this,” she said to the group. *“We count from one to five, two and four being the teleports. Roughly one second in total.”*

“Understood,” Verena replied, appearing in her starting position.

Owl gave her a nod and did the same.

“Can we add a count before it starts, too?” the Lich asked.

“Makes sense, so one two three, then one through five,” Ilea replied.

Both confirmed as most of the others made some distance.

Ilea started counting, and they all did their thing.

“I messed up positioning on two of the gates,” Ilea murmured.

“Can you teleport me about half a meter farther right and up?” Verena asked.

Ilea moved a few of the ashen spheres, and they tried again.

They repeated the preparation another twenty times before they felt comfortable with their positioning and coordination.

* * *

Iana watched the next thirty attempts with bated breath, the two high-level humans and the Lich repeating the section again and again to memorize their targets.

“What do you think?” Christopher asked.

She didn’t reply for a few seconds, focusing instead on the three beings teleporting through space.

One second.

“I would think it impossible,” she said. “But if anybody has a chance, it’s those three.”

A group of thirty high-level mages would’ve been ideal, but the more people were involved, the harder it would be to coordinate.

“It’s worth an attempt, at least,” Christopher said.

“We’ve got the targets down, I think,” Ilea said into their minds. *“Working on the timings now.”*

Iana breathed out. If any of the enchantments were damaged even a fraction of a second early, the whole thing would blow up. On the one hand, she really wanted to see how the defensive enchantments measured up against something the Meadow could set up. On the other hand, she was interested in finding out what was inside the so-called Soul Forge, but more than that, she wanted to know if they could succeed in cracking those defenses.

“Aki, get us to the others.”

“As you wish, Iana,” Aki said and moved them through the air. He landed near the waiting group a few seconds later, Bralin already preparing a defensive perimeter with runed stone.

“Let’s add our own,” she said to Christopher.

Ten minutes later, everything was ready.

“Aight, we’ve got the timing down, too,” Ilea said. *“Let’s give it a shot. I want to solve this thing.”*

“Go ahead,” Iana answered.

As she and Christopher looked through binoculars, she held her breath.

A shimmering purple form was visible in the distance, slightly to the left of the cube. To its right flew a winged being of white flame, and to the front, a humanoid clad in fire.

“Ready?” Ilea asked, her voice still able to reach them.

Then came the count, fast enough to fit five beats into one second.

“One… two…”

Iana watched as beams of magic flew in the distance, a light show of purple, white, turquoise, and fiery red. The angles changed within tenths of a second. And then it was over.

“Did they do it?” Pierce asked, looking through a slit in the enchanted stone wall.

“Cube has calmed. Magic output is much lower,” Ilea sent.

Iana breathed out and put down her looking glass. “They did it…”

Christopher jumped for joy before he hugged her.

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SIXTY-FOUR

The King of Souls

Ilea glanced between the massive cube and her two companions. “Looks like it worked.”

“Most of the power is gone, yes,” Verena answered as she flew over.

“Oh, did we do it? I was so nervous!” Owl said, the latter half in a quiet voice. Her ethereal four-mark hands were shaking slightly. She laughed. “I nearly missed the first two spells.”

“Good thing you didn’t,” Ilea said with a smile. “Guess we would’ve seen an interesting explosion. Ah, well.”

Anticlimactic.

‘ding’ You have helped remove the defensive enchantments of the Soul Forge – 1 Core Skill point awarded

Nice. So we really did make it.

She informed the waiting group telepathically and landed near the entrance.

The others soon gathered nearby. A large part of the protective stone cover had been blown away by the many spells that had hit the enchantments in their coordinated effort. Bralin started removing the rest when he reached them.

“Perfect. Well done,” Iana said with a bright smile when Aki set the two enchanters down.

The Shades seemed just as excited.

“Kind of wanted to see what would’ve happened on a fail,” Pierce said from within her war machine.

“Yeah, me too,” Ilea said, glancing at her.

“Just ask the Meadow to blast you away. I’m sure it wouldn’t have been more impressive than whatever it can conjure up,” Iana said. “Now, who will do the honors?”

“Is that even a question?” Pierce asked, looking at Ilea. “She’s the most durable. Whatever’s waiting inside, she has the highest chance of survival.”

“Still hoping for that explosion, hmm?” Ilea asked.

“Something along those lines,” Pierce said, taking a few large steps back.

Ilea couldn’t perceive any major defensive enchantments anymore, though her dominion was still prevented from piercing the steel walls. “Anything else we can do?”

Iana’s eyes had been glowing blue the entire time. She shook her head lightly. “No. The entrance is still locked, but it’s purely physical.” She walked down the steps to join Pierce at a safe distance. “And I agree. You have the best chance. Good luck.”

“So easily thrown to the drakes,” Ilea murmured.

Verena gave her a thumbs-up and joined the others. Owl was the only one who remained by her side.

“I might not be as versatile, but I have more health than you. And more levels.”

“Yeah.” Ilea glanced at her and charged up her Space Manipulation. “Ready?”

“Ready when you are,” Owl replied.

Ilea smiled and grasped the large double gates with her control, her hands closed into fists, each focused on one of the steel doors, before she gave them a charged pull.

Steel screeched and shook, the metal dragged outward by an arm’s length before it gave against her invisible grasp. The thick steel doors were ripped out, hinges and all, and flew to the side. One fell to the ground with a loud crash. The other one sent a wave of fluorescent blue water splashing out from where it landed.

A mist of steam floated out from the open entrance. Ilea could see inside with her dominion now, instantly locking onto the many Soul Wardens – and one in particular. Most were the Tuned model, but one was larger, with metallic wings and a spear in its hands instead of a sword. Its head was adorned with a steel crown. But the being wasn't moving, nor did she feel any magic coming from its form.

"Lots of inactive Wardens in there," Ilea warned. "And one… creature."

"What is it?" Pierce asked.

Ilea looked at Owl and gestured for her to follow. "Let's find out."

The steam was neither toxic nor curse or death-ridden, to Ilea's disappointment. The innards of the cube were divided into rooms and halls, much like someone would design an underground research facility.

It reminded her of Nes and Scipio's home in the north in some ways. There wasn't quite as much memorabilia as in their facility, but a few rooms had definitely been furnished to be comfortable and cozy. There was even a hearth in one, but Ilea didn't understand where the smoke went.

Most of the rooms seemed to be dedicated to research and experimentation. As well as several libraries, there were four halls that reminded her of Bralin's smithy in the Pit. Those housed most of the war machines.

Are they really war machines if they can't be piloted? War monsters? Soul machines?

The central hall mimicked the external cube in shape, horizontal platforms built within, suggesting that this was indeed the facility's intended orientation. Within was what she assumed to be the main lab. Mostly because it was the most chaotic one.

Tables and workbenches covered in tools, notes, and even tubes containing dead beings were all strewn about. A few corpses lay dissected below glass covers on enchanted steel tables. She saw dwarves, humans, and even an elf.

At the center of the lab stood a four-meter-high metal apparatus. A dozen arms were connected to it, aimed forward, and various tubes and containers were also attached. Ahead of it was a platform equipped with various mounting supports similar to the ones Bralin had used to prop up her living armor.

Ilea teleported herself and the Lich in front of the closed entrance. She saw no enchantments, and while the door was closed, it was unlocked.

“Don’t kill it,” she said.

“I can perceive it now… and I’m curious, too. I liked the other one,” Owl replied.

Ilea brought them inside with another teleport, her eyes falling on the single small being, black as the abyss. Large white eyes turned her way as its head tilted to the side, a telepathic giggle flowing through their minds. She had found another Fae.

“Hello,” she sent with a smile and waved at the creature.

It moved its six wings of white energy, floating a meter higher with a twirl.

Ilea watched, entranced by the complexity she perceived with her Space Manipulation. She hadn’t seen a Fae since her evolution.

The Fae spread its handless arms wide before it spoke, its voice high-pitched and fluctuating in a confusing pattern.

“Who intrudes on the *King’s* domain?! You will die for this transgression!”

“Eh?” Ilea got out, glancing at the Lich next to her. She knew not to underestimate a Fae, more than most. But this was just a fragment of the whole, and something about it felt strange. And it wasn’t just the fact that it was speaking out loud.

“You would take me lightly? The almighty Khan?” the Fae exclaimed, waving its arms toward them.

Ilea tensed up, her body bursting into flame, ready to teleport both the Lich and herself. Her companion remained entirely calm, though, apparently amused by the creature.

[Fae – lvl 112]

A burst of space magic shot out from the Fae’s hands. The blast didn’t quite reach the two intruders, merely sending a few pieces of paper from a nearby workbench fluttering down to the steel floor.

“What’s going on?” Ilea asked, slowly easing the tension in her body.

The Fae floated down a little, its arms at its sides once more, the previous tension gone entirely.

Friend, the Fae said.

The voice felt distinctly feminine, and the words had been delivered far differently to those that had reached them before. A feeling of calm

followed, along with interest, trust, and some amusement. It paused, seemingly considering something, then floated just a little closer.

Arbiter.

Creator.

Greetings.

"Greetings," Ilea said again. *"I didn't expect to meet one of you down here. What was all that about?"*

The Fae seemed amused, tilting its head to the side as it took in both Ilea and the Greater Lich.

Unusual. Pair.

"I suppose we are," Ilea said. *"You've been trapped in here, then? Or is this your facility? You did just call yourself Khan."*

"This being… houses two souls," Owl said. *"It's… confusing. Is this normal?"*

"You're the soul mage, you tell me."

The Fae giggled, a hand in front of its non-existent mouth.

Abnormal. Soul. Remains.

Not. My. Facility.

Khan. Joggoth. Capture. Me. Die. In. Battle.

The being floated around the hall, motioning first to the massive apparatus, then to the large inactive war machine.

Unfortunate. It paused and giggled again. *Accident.*

"That's supposed to be his?" Ilea asked, looking at the massive steel creation.

Unknown, the Fae sent, though from the twinkle in its eyes and word, it seemed very much in the know.

Ilea smiled. *"Let me guess,"* she said and activated Fabric Tear, the machine switching places with the Fae. *"Something like that?"*

Accident. Reenactment. Accurate.

Impressive. Arbiter.

"Ilea. I am getting the feeling that it wasn't an accident at all," Owl whispered to her via telepathy.

"Oh golly gosh, Lich King! What, pray tell, gave it away?" Ilea asked with exaggerated shock, then she laughed.

"*What? Is it that obvious?"* Owl deadpanned.

"You're not familiar with them. It's a Fae. Capturing one of them for anything but a nice cup of tea is a baaaad idea."

“I… see. I’m still a little confused. Its essence is quite beautiful. The other bit looks similar to that of your companions, but somehow… in there, too. It’s strange.” She shook her head as if trying to get rid of the image in her mind.

Ilea introduced herself. *“I’m Lilith. I’ve met several of your kind before.”*

Lilith, the being sent with a note of both interest and respect.

Beings. Similar. Yet. Different.

“I’m not sure I get your meaning. I’m not exactly on the level of a Fae when it comes to mental capacity,” she said.

Self. Aware. Amusing.

Different. Whole.

Mark. Similar.

Friend. To. Fae.

“Alright. Different… whole? So you’re from a different cluster? Is that an issue?”

Coexistence. Always. Preferable.

On a downright instinctual level, she knew the being was speaking the truth.

“Good. Do you lay claim to the stuff here, or can my companions and I look through it and take what we want?”

Knowledge. Gained. Long. Ago.

Commence.

The being floated closer.

Accompany?

“You want to accompany me?”

Interesting. Being.

It seemed just as straightforward as Violence tended to be.

“Sure. If you want, you can explain what happened here and why you’ve got what I think is the soul of Khan Joggoth trapped within you.”

“Imbecile! I will grind your very soul down until nothing remains of what you were or ever will be!” the Fae said in an outright adorable voice, hands shaking in outrage before it resumed a calm stance.

Apologies. Outburst.

Soul. Transfer. Initiated. On. Presumed. Death. Skill? Enchantment? Both. Likely. Joggoth. Cruel. Arrogant. Transfer. Interrupted. Soul. Fused. Control. Remains. Mostly.

“So you’re the one who defeated this legendary soul mage?” Ilea asked.

The Fae waved her off.

Amusing.

Ilea failed to grasp exactly what the being was trying to convey with the feelings and thoughts it had added to the word. Even so, the circumstances amused her greatly, especially with what little she’d heard about the Soul Forge and Khan Joggoth.

Feared and infamous. And this is how it ended.

Well. His soul is stuck in the Fae, I guess. Surprising that there’s still some sort of identity there, but then again, I’m not a soul mage.

Either way, whatever’s left seems like an asshole.

“Alright, then. If you don’t think you’re a danger to other creatures with that soul inside you, you can travel with me for a while. You’ll have to stay back when it’s dangerous, though, and I’ll have you hide occasionally. Not sure how that will work if you have those outbursts…”

Acceptable, the being sent with a thought of amusement.

“Also, this is already taken,” Ilea said, tapping her right shoulder.

Envy. Of. Prime. Shoulder.

“Primordial, actually,” Ilea answered.

The Fae tilted its head and vanished, reappearing on her left shoulder instead.

Left. Good. Too.

Ilea glanced down at the creature as it simply sat and observed, wisps of the fabric moving around as if at its will.

This one seems more mature than Violence for some reason. I feel like it may not have even talked to me if not for the mark that Violence left on me.

“RABBLE!!” the Fae shouted in her ear in a high-pitched voice.

“Yes,” Ilea said, patting the little being with an ashen limb.

Maybe not the best idea.

She observed the being for a few minutes as Owl floated around her.

“Do you need help to get back to your cluster?” she asked after a while.

Neither she nor the Lich was able to perceive anything particularly dangerous about the creature. Violence had incredible space magic at its disposal for its level and could survive attacks that would entirely remove a level one hundred human from existence, but Ilea doubted this creature would be able to harm her, or even anyone above level two hundred.

The second soul was concerning, of course, but both the Fae and Owl confirmed that, apart from the short outbursts, the original owner retained control of the being's body.

Now. Free.

Appreciate. Offer.

Hmm, this one is more willing to talk in less confusing words, too. Either it's more familiar with humans or, well, it's less of a little shit than Violence.

She smiled, thinking of the little bugger.

Hah, might as well.

"I found another Fae. New friend or dangerous?" she asked the creature.

The being on her shoulder looked up and away. Ilea didn't miss that the direction it looked in corresponded exactly with the direction of her friend's mark.

Perceptive.

Even with everything she had, she couldn't really see the messages sent through her marks, other than a vague magical pulse in a random direction, easily missed in the ambient mana and the magic of her auras.

Violence.

That was all the being sent back, the meaning as multifaceted and confusing as anything else it could've said. And yet it didn't surprise Ilea at all.

She knew him somewhat by now, however. There was interest in there, some joy, hope, jealousy, and a seething desire for absolute destruction.

Now I want them both on my shoulders, like some kind of space combat drones.

"I don't suppose you're particularly interested in violence?" Ilea asked as she started toward the exit.

Not. Direct. Violence. Magical. Demonstration. Of. Power. Amusing. And. Consequences. Of. Actions.

"Any reason you can't speak like when Khan takes over your form? I'm pretty sure you lack any voice organs, but it still somehow works when there's an outburst."

Slowed. For. Your. Benefit. I. Lack. Power. To. Communicate. Adequate.

"I see. So how would you normally communicate?"

The Fae tilted its head to the side.

Sure?

“Yeah, go for it. I’ll feed you a couple thousand mana if it’s worse than anything else I’ve been subjected to.”

A fast-moving set of images, thoughts, and feelings invaded her mind, cut off after a split second when the Fae reeled back, holding its tiny head with one of its hands.

Ilea healed it immediately. *“Sorry. Didn’t think it would count as a mental attack! I forgot to say I have a third-tier resistance.”*

Know. Defense. Perceived. More. Power. Than. Anticipated.

“I see. Guess you can keep it to simple words, then. Ah, I’ve got a friend I’d love to introduce you to. It’s a massive fan of your species. I’d think it could handle your normal way of talking.”

Oh? Amusing. Acceptable.

So this one is Amusing instead of Violence? Baron Amusing? Lady Amusing? I’m not sure about those yet. Needs more work.

“Do you have a name?”

“I’m Khan Joggoth, and you will bow before me,” the Fae replied in a calm tone.

“Not you, the other one,” Ilea said.

Name. Meaningless. Choose. Human.

“I’ll have to think of something,” Ilea murmured as she stepped out of the Soul Forge, her head turned to the side as she looked at the Fae.

“Oh, it’s Violence,” Pierce said and waved.

“It’s not the same one,” Verena said.

“A… Fae? What?” Bralin added as the two Shades bowed in a fluid motion.

Aki stepped a little closer. “Another one. When will you end your ceaseless need to collect strange beings from ancient ruins?”

The Fae ignored everyone but Aki, simply looking at the Taleen machine.

“Found something amusing?” Ilea asked.

Hmm, the being replied, not offering anything else.

“So, what’s inside?” Pierce asked. “Other than that small space thingie?”

Small? said the being to Ilea.

“She’s not a space mage. I know the concept of size doesn’t exactly apply to you.”

Understand.

Ilea turned around and gestured for everyone to follow. “It seems safe enough in there. Plenty of research, inactive Wardens, and machines I have no clue what to do with. We have time, too, so knock yourselves out. Our arena fights are another day off.”

“Treasure…” Pierce murmured as she stored her armor and vanished.

Iana walked in after her, dragging Christopher with her and calling, “Don’t touch anything yet!”

“I think you can get up now,” Ilea said to the Shades, their heads still bowed.

They didn’t react.

“Can you tell them to stop bowing? They think you’re some kind of god,” she said to the Fae.

Am.

“Great,” Ilea sighed and heard a giggling sound within her mind.

The Shades lifted their heads a moment later, looking at the being before they floated past, bowing once more as they went by.

“You don’t want to go in?” Ilea asked, looking at Aki.

The machine walked closer, eliciting a response from the Fae, who hovered toward him. “Someone should guard the entrance.”

Ilea formed two ashen copies of herself, each receiving a layer of her mantle. “These should be more than enough to watch our backs. Come in and play.”

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SIXTY-FIVE

Free Real Estate

The Fae watched Aki walk into the Soul Forge with cautious steps.

"Why are you so interested in him?" Ilea asked.

Magic. Imitating. Essence.

New. Information.

"You could tell from just a look? What do you think about it?"

Intelligence. Real.

Form. Irrelevant.

She smiled. *"Yeah, I think so too. One of our enchanters helped him stabilize a bit more. I don't think he'll be influenced anytime soon. He's no more susceptible to mind magic or other spells than anyone else."*

Caring.

"He's a friend. And even if he wasn't, he deserves to have his independence just like everyone else."

Understand.

Bralin cleared his throat. "I've come to accept that I might've died a while ago and this is the fever dream I came up with in my last waking moments."

"Let's see what kind of knowledge your subconscious thinks the great Joggoth has hidden in his Soul Forge," Ilea said as she went back inside. She left the two armored ashen copies where the Tuned Soul Wardens had stood before.

The Soul Forge is under new management.

She didn’t bother joining the largest group in the central hall, instead taking the steel stairs up to the fourth floor, where she had seen a cozy room with a small kitchen adjacent. A glance at her dominion showed Pierce going through various storage rooms, picking up treasure as she went.

Ilea used Fabric Tear to save a few of the more interesting chests for herself and stacked them on the red velvet carpet in front of the cold hearth. She raised her hand and moved some old wood into the opening. A bit of lava came to life a few meters away from her before it floated between the logs.

“Any clue how we can get rid of the smoke? The hearth doesn’t seem to lead anywhere,” she said, looking at her floating Faen companion.

The creature moved toward the hearth and touched the frame, tapping it a few times until something lit up, activating a series of enchantments and opening a vent. The smoke was pulled in and replaced with fresh air entering through another opening, all likely intertwined with the magic mesh protecting the cube in the first place.

The rest of the room housed three comfortable leather armchairs, two large bookshelves filled to the brim with thick volumes, and a polished wooden coffee table with a pretty base of curved steel. Warm, magical light came from several spherical orbs connected to the ceiling by thin strands of metal.

Ilea added some more lava to the logs and went to the small kitchen. The various compartments and tools looked high-quality, but she wasn’t exactly a master chef. Instead, she checked the extensive selection of teas, smelling each until she found something to her liking. The mix reminded her of black tea with a hint of cinnamon.

“How do I boil water?” Ilea asked the Fae as she checked the steel plates.

This kitchen looks more modern and Earth-like than half the shit I ever had back then.

She looked up and checked the wall. Everything was clean and well-sorted. Ilea watched the Fae fiddle with the stove until it jumped up, having been standing on a plate that had started glowing.

“Thanks.”

She touched the familiar water collection enchantment before filling a small ceramic pot with a small crown on it.

“You would dare drink from MY TEA?!” demanded Khan.

Ilea looked at the Fae. *“It’s not like you need it.”* She paused. *“Is he just straight-up trapped in there? Conscious and everything?”*

No.

The Fae thought for a few seconds.

Essence. Only.

Echoes. Of. Memory. If. Outburst. Takes. Control. Cognitive. Function. Active. No. Outburst. Dormant. State. Lacks. Capability. Remain. Conscious.

Ilea let the explanation sink in as she waited for the water to boil, then filled a tea strainer with tea and put it into a black mug.

“Still seems cruel. Can you not just kill him?”

Agree. Amusing. First. Century. Removal. Dangerous. Requires. Soul. Magic. Lich?

“Owl could probably help at some point, sure. But she’s not very experienced with her magic.”

Cannot. Return.

Foreign. Influence.

“You can’t go home with the soul in there?”

The Fae nodded.

*“Then we’ll figure something out together,”*she said, pouring water into the mug.

The Meadow will be interested anyways, might as well hit two birds with one stone. She closed her eyes and inhaled. The strong scent slowly spread through the room before she sat down in one of the armchairs. Flames had started consuming the wood, the fragrances mixing as she relaxed and sighed.

‘ding’ You drank tea from the famous personal collection of Khan Joggoth with the remains of his soul within a Fae sitting on your shoulder – 1 Core Skill point awarded

How very specific, Ilea thought as she reclined in the chair. She summoned a comfy-looking blanket from a nearby room before snuggling into it, her eyes focused on the crackling fire as the mug warmed her hands.

She was technically trespassing, yet she didn’t feel bad about it. The Soul Wardens had attacked them without thought, and what remained of Khan Joggoth didn’t leave a particularly good impression.

In terms of ancient dungeon finds, she was glad to have found this room and a collection of tea instead of yet more ancient monsters, traps, and coffers full of gold. At least for once.

Relaxing, sent the Fae before it drooped down into the blanket.

Ilea patted it gently, observing the goings-on within the cube through her perception. She displaced more of the treasures and artifacts Pierce was about to find into the growing pile next to her armchair. The enchanters and Aki were reading through the notes and books in the central hall, talking to each other with excited gestures.

Bralin, in the meantime, was inspecting the Soul Wardens, interested specifically in the large model with the crown. While the Shades were joining the group in the main hall, open books in front of them, Verena seemed a little lost, peering at some scientific tools and sighing.

Ilea formed a gate next to the Elder and another in the cozy room. *"Tea?"*

Verena stepped through the slightly fluctuating air. When she appeared in the room, she smiled. "Better," she murmured, walking to the kitchen to check the various teas herself. A minute later, she sat down in one of the armchairs, a steaming mug in hand. The Fae glanced over at her but remained on the comfortable blanket.

"This place is pretty well equipped," Ilea said after a few minutes of silence. She moved her hand to hover more logs into the flames, adding a little bit of heat to the ash in the hearth.

"The tea selection is exquisite," Verena confirmed, closing her eyes as she sipped it.

"Yeah…"

Verena eyed her suspiciously. "You're planning something. What is it? A base down here?"

Ilea smiled. "No. No, I don't think so. The location will be found by delvers from the Pit soon, now that the mind magic creature is gone. And with the defensive enchantments destroyed, it might as well just be a chunk of metal."

"Oh… I see." After a while, she added, "Do you think something like that is possible?"

Ilea patted the Fae. "Plenty of geniuses around. And it would be nice to have some more facilities in the north. I think this cube would add to the flair."

“It would.”

“And, well… it’s all here already. All we have to do is move it.”

Verena smiled to herself but didn’t say anything. She raised a finger, a pulse of magic making the flames in the hearth flare.

Ilea finished her tea and stood up. She moved a bit of ash around the mug to clean it, then displaced it back into the cupboard.

“Want to stay?” she asked the Fae, still wrapped in the blanket on the chair.

It moved more of the fabric around itself, only half of its large white eyes visible.

Ilea smiled and teleported down into the main hall. She stretched and shuddered slightly at the sudden change in temperature. She managed to resist the temptation of forming heat, if only to prevent important research from being set ablaze.

“Interesting reading?” she asked the room at large.

Iana looked up from the notes in her hands. “Yes. Very. What might interest you is the fact that Khan Joggoth had trade relations with the Taleen. They shared research projects and exchanged technologies,” she said, tapping her head with a meaningful glance to the Shades.

Ilea raised a brow. *“You don’t trust them?”* she asked, using telepathy.

“With what we find here, I do. But not with the conclusions,” Iana said. *“Joggoth and the Taleen worked together on something they call the Ascension Project II. And yes, it has to do with the Ascended themselves.*

“Apparently, they managed to gather quite a bit of knowledge and technology from their attacks on existing Ascended facilities. It looks like the Taleen tried to get their hands on the technology that allowed the Ascended to well… ascend.”

“They would be interested in that for sure,” Ilea said. *“But I imagine they weren’t successful.”*

“What makes you think that?”

“We’re not living under the rule of our Ascended Taleen overlords.”

“That’s a good point. Either way, Joggoth was a king, local, and not Taleen. He did his own research and obviously focused on the soul above all else.”

She nodded toward the large apparatus at the back of the hall.

“That’s the machine that bound his people to their Warden models. A dangerous tool, and it seems like he succeeded, at least in part. Ilea, the

main thing I'm concerned about is the information he sold to the Taleen. Parts of it… remind me a lot of what I've seen on Aki."

"A lot?" Ilea asked, raising a brow.

"I'm almost certain he was created using some of this research. There are locations mentioned, too. Taleen research facilities, hidden below ground. Khan Joggoth never considered them allies, and he planned to take their machines by force once his armies had established him in the local area."

"He failed, though. Bralin mentioned some king defeated him."

"Well, a massive natural disaster killed most of his people and destroyed most of his lands, his research, and everything else. He writes of a last effort to establish himself during the chaos, but, well, it seems he was defeated."

"The Fae might have had something to do with that." Ilea glanced at the crowned suit of armor. *"Can you write down the names of those Taleen facilities? Maybe we can find them on the map."*

"I already did that. Three of them are listed," Iana said. *"The Fae was mentioned in the research. It apparently found its way into the Soul Forge by itself, drawn by the research. Once it understood more, it chose not to cooperate with Khan Joggoth, which is when he imprisoned it. He conducted experiments on it too, but apparently failed to gain an understanding of its nature."*

"Thanks for the breakdown. I'm sure you'll find more interesting bits. But I think we should go back to the Meadow as soon as possible."

"We have to look through everything here, Ilea. This is ancient knowledge, from a time when these peoples had an incredible breadth of resources, connected through teleportation gates… underground cities humanity might've never even seen!"

"I didn't say we should leave anything behind," Ilea said. Breaking the telepathic link, she added, "What I mean is we should move this entire facility to the Meadow."

Iana blinked a few times, Christopher and the others now looking at her as well.

"Either that or we gather what we can and destroy the rest," Ilea said. "Unless you have a better idea."

"I support the destruction bit," Bralin said. "If someone possesses this thing…" he added, staring at the large, silent Warden.

Iana sighed and crossed her arms. “So, if I understand this right, you want to move this entire facility, a cube whose sides are each a hundred and twenty meters long and weighs hundreds of tons of steel… where, to the Meadow’s domain? Hundreds of kilometers to the north?”

Ilea smiled. “Precisely. Can you do it?”

Iana looked at her for a long moment, first with annoyance, then with curiosity. Then she smiled. “You have the most annoying ideas.”

As she summoned a large tome, Christopher went to stand by her side.

“Can I do it? No, not in a thousand years,” Iana said. “But with the help of some very powerful beings, a group of high-level mages, mana sources from a triple-mark human, and two four-marks? It might be worth a shot. I’ll get to work immediately. Chris, you have the circles written down?”

“I do. We have the measurements already. Its weight might be an issue depending on where Meadow wants to put it,” he said, summoning another book. “Oh, there was an empty storage ring here. I took it to collect as much as possible before we leave.”

“Finder’s keepers,” Ilea said with a smile, still occasionally moving interesting things away from Pierce.

“We might keep this place, so stop the raiding,” Ilea sent to her.

“There’s nothing here anyway. Fucking waste of time,” Pierce replied.

Ilea looked through her dominion at the gold and various items giving off magical auras on the pile next to Verena.

“You can send ten words, is that right?” Iana asked.

“To the Meadow? Yes,” Ilea answered.

“We’ll write them down. If we’re going to move this thing, we’ll need its help from the other side, and a massive push from this one.”

“Any way the Fae could help? It’s probably the most knowledgeable space mage we have.”

“If it’s willing to help. I’d rather not have any wildcards in the mix, though,” Iana said. “And it will take some time to set up. Longer than the enchantments did.”

“Sounds good. We’ll go up to the Pit to fight in the Dome – there’s still another key up there. But I’ll leave a copy here, and you’ll have both Aki and Owl. I still have the spatial anchor in the north, if that helps.”

“Good. And don’t worry. The Meadow is our anchor,” Iana said. “Alright, let’s get to work. Chris, measurements. Hmm, with the time we’ll need for this… Ilea, can we get a lift back to the Meadow with everyone

who wants to stay there, and then back again once we've discussed everything necessary? I'd also like to move everything that fits into a storage item first. In case the whole thing fails."

"Sounds like the safe bet, sure," Ilea said. "I'll help with the cleanup."

She teleported up to Verena and started storing everything not built into the rooms themselves.

"So, is it possible?" Verena asked.

Ilea walked out of the kitchen, a mist of ash flowing over everything, only the two occupied armchairs remaining. She even stored the wood.

"Maybe. I think Iana and Christopher usually underestimate their own abilities, which means I'm confident it will work. They'll take some time to set everything up, so we can go to the Pit while they prepare."

"I assume we're storing everything in case it doesn't work?"

Ilea nodded and glanced at the Fae, whose large white eyes were taking everything in. *"We're going to try to move the entire Soul Forge to my friend's domain farther north. The two enchanters downstairs will set up a collaborative effort with said friend. I'm sure your space magic expertise would be an incredible help, if you're willing. If not, a few of us will be participating in some arena battles between war machines. That option offers a bit more action."*

Amusing.

Will. Help. Move. Mass.

"Oh, really?"

Surprise?

"Yeah, sorry. The Fae I know would've immediately chosen to watch the arena battles," she said with a smile.

Outlier. Amusing.

Meet?

"He shows up at the Meadow's from time to time."

Fun.

"Indeed," she said as she finished packing up the floor. Ilea found she was able to carry larger pieces of furniture and Soul Wardens in her domain that didn't fit into the storage items of her allies – or her own, for that matter. *"It was mentioned in some notes we found that you showed up here of your own volition?"*

The Fae landed on her shoulder.

Yes. Interesting. Settlement. Fascinating. Research, the being said. *Help. Refusal. Trapped.*

"Your kind doesn't seem to care much for the passing of time."

Age. Irrelevant.

"I suppose so." Ilea wondered how many of the Fae were stuck somewhere. *"Do you have a way to find trapped Fae? I'd be happy to get them out of whatever magical prisons they've found themselves in."*

Appreciate. Friend.

Many. Cut. Off. Find. Impossible.

"But you're insanely powerful… I just can't imagine that you couldn't find your brethren somehow."

Many. We. Found.

"Ah, so it's just the ones hidden behind enchantments or the like?"

Yes.

"And the ones you can find… what, you go in swords drawn? A full-on cavalry charge?" she asked with a grin.

Amusing.

No.

Helpers. Sent.

"Helpers?" Ilea asked, intrigued by exactly what constituted a helper to the Fae.

Ally. Mercenary. Friend. Monster. Many. Ways.

"Damn. I thought you'd have a group of Faen Valkyries or something. Ready to go out to get the lost travelers back."

The being giggled in her mind.

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SIXTY-SIX

Magic

The group stored everything they could before Ilea gathered them close to her. She left two of her ash copies behind to prevent anybody else from entering the cube. With non-lethal force, just in case any adventurers managed to get there in the span of half a day.

She activated Transfer, Fabric Tear connecting the group to her long-range teleportation before they were shifted in the fabric and reappeared in the domain of the Meadow.

"Sooner than expected," the being said. *"Greetings, traveler. Welcome to my humble abode,"* it added, the words specifically aimed at the Fae.

Ilea could see a complex mesh of space magic form all around them, a demonstration that seemed to serve as a greeting. *"What, you're a peacock now? Feathers all spread out to impress the lady?"*

"I am simply trying to converse, Ilea. I have little understanding of how these beings see the world around them. And this one has already said ten times as much to me as Violence."

"Before you get entirely lost, we want to bring back a massive steel cube."

"The Fae has explained the circumstances, yes. The measurements seem reasonable. I'm already preparing a suitable section of my domain," the Meadow said as stone began to shift in the cavern, a large section between the corridors that led up to Hallowfort and down to the Descent. *"I assume you would like to claim the cube for yourself? Or the Sentinels?"*

Ilea patted the Fae on her shoulder with an ashen limb. *“I hadn’t really thought about it, but the Soul Forge as a Northern Sentinels outpost would be pretty badass. I will also want to reserve a room for myself. If the whole idea is alright with you. I don’t want to force interactions on you that you might want to avoid. Or put anything in your domain that you don’t want here.”*

“I’ve been enjoying the life you’ve brought to this place. It’s… refreshing, to be seen as… something other than a god or monster. And I’m sure I can help teach your Sentinels more than a few things. I’m a healer myself, after all. Even you managed to learn something, which means anyone can do it.”

“Hah. And yeah. I’m liking this idea a lot. Especially with the upcoming teleportation gates so that we can welcome them here. I guess we can resume our training while you plan everything with the others. I’ve gotten enough Core points for another skill enhancement, too.”

“What’s happening?” Pierce asked.

The group was staring at the shifting stone, large slabs folding out of the massive cavern wall. The floating material dissolved into nothing. Behind it, the imprint of a sideways cube was being carved into a section of the Meadow’s domain.

“You may leave the furniture on the ground. I will take care of it,” the Meadow said, eliciting a few looks.

“You’ve already got the measurements?” Iana asked, summoning her notes. “I see… yes. Let’s go over the runes again. We only have one chance. If we fail, the thing will be torn apart.”

Ilea left the others to their own devices. The Fae remained on her shoulder as she sat down near the crystal tree.

“Truly enlightening,” the Meadow said. *“Thank you for bringing Twin here.”*

“Twin?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. It appears Owl has nicknamed it such due to the situation concerning its soul.”

“Twin, you’re alright with the name?” she asked the creature.

Twin.

Acceptable.

“Good, Twin it is,” Ilea said with a smile.

Not exactly two of the same in there, but I suppose it doesn't matter much.

Owl joined them, likely communicating with the Meadow in an effort to rid the Fae of its problematic state.

A base for the Sentinels in the north. I just thought it would be cool to have the cube, but that's much better.

"How are the gates and negotiations coming along, by the way?" she asked.

"I believe the meeting in Ravenhall was a success. The councils are discussing potential treaties. And Claire is securing a lot of the metals required within the human lands. They believe that once any nation or spy network understands that something is underway in Ravenhall, it will already be too late."

"It sounds like we're trying to take over the world…"

"Well, introducing an alliance between the Awakened of the north and the humans of the south is sure to stir things up. Let alone the impact of the teleportation gates. Perhaps we won't be taking over the world, but we will change it."

"Yeah. Best to gather as much strength before the storm hits then."

One skill to enhance… Let's go with Embered Form, she thought, using five of her Core Skill points to enhance it.

'ding' Embered Form [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 1
Passive: Embered Form [Enhanced] – 3rd lvl 1:
You are one with the fighting style of ash. Damage inflicted is 70.5% [705%] higher.
2nd stage: Adds density to your bones, muscles, and skin to increase strength, speed, and damage. Base body weight is doubled. The abuse your body takes from your own strikes and their feedback is reduced.
3rd stage: Reduces stamina consumption by a static 35%. Mana intrusion attacks formed or charged within your arms, hands, fingers, legs, feet, or head can be converted into a purely physical damage increase to the executed attack. Be aware that this increase will be heavily demanding for your body. Increases your base shock absorption by 5% [50%].
Category: Body Enhancement

More shock absorption. To counter the damage I take from the enhanced physical attacks? But it's useful in general, too. More resilience, basically.

Ilea had no clue what her base shock absorption was or if the bonus she got from her Earth Magic Resistance was added afterward, if any of it was multiplying, or if it was just in addition to each other.

"Nothing good?" the Meadow asked, likely engaged in more than a few conversations at the moment. The cubical imprint it was preparing was still under construction, more sets of runes being cut into the stone walls with every passing second.

"No, it's good. Just not exciting. More shock absorption. Maybe we could test?"

A chunk of stone the size of Ilea's head appeared a few meters away before it shot forward and smacked her face. Her head won out; the chunk was deflected off to the side before it hit the ground a few times and rolled to a stop. Her skin was slightly scratched, but it was already healed when she glanced at the tree.

"Verdict?"

"Your head barely moved. A noticeable improvement," the Meadow said. *"I believe you're now more durable than most four-marks I've ever seen. If we take your regeneration, healing, resistances, and mana absorption into account."*

"It's a good start," Ilea said. *"Let's continue the training, then."*

* * *

Ilea spent the next few hours training with the Meadow until Iana and Christopher were ready to go back to the Soul Forge, though she only managed to level a few skills from the intense and literally gutting experience.

'ding' Archon Strike [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Mantle of the Titan [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3

The enchanters packed up the prepared materials and made them vanish into their storage devices. Twin suggested that it help from the Soul Forge's end in case any of the space magic runes caused unexpected fluctuations. None of the mana suppliers had the necessary control to make sure the ritual would be perfectly stable, not even Ilea with her Space Manipulation.

The Meadow had gathered and categorized all the collected materials, books, shelves, tables, and everything else from within the Soul Forge, ready to place them all back where they belonged. As long as they succeeded with the large-scale transfer.

"See you later," Ilea said, then activated her spell, connecting everyone to her long-range ability before they vanished.

Reappearing inside the cavern, Ilea looked around. *No adventurers so far.*

Her copies were still standing guard close to the entrance, now aided by Aki and Owl. Or rather, replaced. As powerful as they were, they wouldn't be able to match the two high-level beings.

"We should probably get up to the Dome soon. You're coming up with us, I assume?" she asked, looking at Bralin.

"Indeed. Your precious tree has prepared all the runes already. Nothing I could ever match with my humble skills."

"At least you're not a tree," Pierce said as she joined with her war machine.

Ilea smiled to herself. Even with all her perception, she could barely comprehend a part of the Meadow's form. She made the joke often enough herself, but hearing Pierce say it was funny. Because it seemed like she meant it.

"Call for me if something comes up," Ilea said to the enchanters as she spread her wings. The Shades stood a short distance from the duo.

"Will do. Enjoy your arena thingy," Iana said.

"Good luck," Christopher said with a thumbs-up.

Ilea summoned her armaments. "Luck is nothing in the face of steel," she said in her booming voice.

* * *

Bralin didn't know what he should think of his new companions. Perhaps even friends? Ilea had introduced herself with the name Lilith, but her allies

had quickly mentioned her apparent real name. Not that she seemed to care about it in the slightest. He had wondered if it meant something, but in the end, she seemed to act somewhat impulsively.

The fact that they had even managed to get into the Soul Forge was one thing; what impressed him more was the short time it had taken the enchanters to prepare. And the three mages who had taken part in disabling the enchantments had just casually learned the sequence in a few minutes.

Then she talks to the Fae, and now she wants to move the entire fucking thing to wherever this god-like tree being has its lair. What have I gotten myself into?

At least there should be a lot of gold in this opportunity. I just hope it won't be the end of me.

He watched the two humans run with their war machines, one stolen and the other made by none other than Goliath himself. Bralin once again bit into the side of his mouth to wake himself up from the delirious fever dream his life had turned into. Nothing happened, and all the evidence suggested it was real.

Just roll with the punches, and you'll be sure to come out on the other side with a few insane stories.

The only issue he saw with that was that even the drunkest fuck wouldn't believe half of the shit he had seen in the past few days.

Bralin wondered now about a lot of the ridiculous stories told by people under the influence, tales of dragons, Fae, and unicorns, of bright, shining elves facing down flying Taleen war machines, and of steel-clad beings of space tearing through hordes of Shredders with a single spell.

He shook his head. Was it all true? After what he had seen just in the last day, he was starting to doubt a lot of his beliefs.

"Doing okay?" Verena asked.

The woman was sitting on his armored shoulder, and he hadn't thought to dissuade her. She was very attractive.

"Just… well…"

"God-like creatures all around?" Verena suggested.

"Pretty much. And I've seen a lot."

"Maybe you've been holed up for a bit too long."

"Yeah. Maybe."

"Back up the pit," Ilea said when they reached the cylindrical hole.

Bralin summoned a bottle of whiskey and took a swig. He was back in his normal machine. He resealed the bottle and put it away as ashen limbs moved out to gather everyone but Pierce. Ilea waited for them to confirm that they were all ready, then she flew up.

The stone walls of the pit flew past, repeated teleports moving them up even faster. They slowed down after a few minutes, coming to a stop within sight of the cannons.

“Let’s continue on foot. It will attract less attention. Bralin, you can climb, right?”

He nodded, extending a chunk of stone from the wall until he could stand on it. He winced when Ilea landed on his other shoulder, his machine nearly brought off balance by her weight.

What is that woman made of?

He didn’t ask, instead shifting his balance and quickly moving over to the wall before the stone bridge broke beneath them.

“Don’t want to reveal yourself?” Pierce asked as she reappeared. “The cannons are ready, but the celebrations still seem to be ongoing.”

“Directly to the Dome?” Bralin asked. They still had a few hours until Pierce’s fight, but he assumed the Forged Dome would be packed after the Soul Warden attack.

“Sure,” Ilea said.

“Are there any fights going on now?” Verena asked.

“Yes,” Pierce said. “I had a look at the schedule.”

Bralin formed a thick stone platform and pushed up. As the impromptu elevator moved them up the pit wall at an impressive speed, he took another swig from his bottle, a smile blossoming on his face.

And now you get to watch them demolish the fools fighting in the Dome.

“It’ll be glorious,” he murmured to himself.

“Got another bottle?” Verena asked.

He summoned one and handed it to her. “Eighty years old.”

“I’ll get you something in return.”

“Don’t mention it. Just wanted you to give it the appreciation it deserves,” Bralin said, his platform sliding to a stop when a massive tunnel opened up before them. They were still a few hundred meters from the surface; the Forged Dome was set deep into the stone to make sure the fighting wouldn’t destroy the Pit ten times over.

Already, they could hear the cheers. Most of the long descending tunnel ahead was lit with magical lights, a few war machines on guard duty standing around and watching those walking past.

“So how does this work?” Pierce asked as she stepped off the platform, taking in the broad hallway.

Bralin walked ahead in his war machine, motioning for the others to follow. He led the group toward the open gates at the end of the tunnel. More people were already landing behind them, shouts filling the tunnel as they poured each other ale from some barrels they had with them.

“No entrance fee?” Ilea asked, evidently spotting that there were no ticket booths near the open gates.

“No. Gold is made through bets. Organizers get a percentage of it all. If there was an entrance fee, people would just find a random spot down in the Pit and fight there. It’s based more on… mutual understanding.”

Entering the Dome, Bralin was conscious that two women were sitting on his shoulders. He might’ve felt better about that if it weren’t for the fact that one of them weighed what felt like a ton and was virtually a literal god besides.

Verena, though, he didn’t mind.

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SIXTY-SEVEN

Sports?

Ilea watched the war machines near the entrance to the Forged Dome, their faces covered in heavy steel plate helmets. She would've been terrified to face one of them back when she had arrived in Elos. Now, though, she couldn't quite keep the smile off her face.

Her performance shouldn't be an embarrassment anymore either. Her training over the last few days, coupled with the armor's living nature, had helped her get to an acceptable level of control. And the sword would be a nice touch. Sadly, she'd have to leave her ash and Fires of Creation out of it for now, if she wanted to keep the somewhat lower status of a high-level human and friendship with Bralin.

Finally on track to get that key as well. Though I'm enjoying this underground town.

Their group was getting some looks, but not to the extent where it was a bother. Or worse, cult-like. She could fool nearly all of them with Monstrous, passing as a simple high-level battle healer.

The massive iron gates opened up into an expansive circular space, the dome above carved into the cavern ceiling and made entirely of a dull silver metal. Steel supports went along the whole structure, the parts within her dominion shining with the magical light of enchantments.

Simple stone stairs all around the nearly three-hundred-meter-long arena provided spectators with space to sit or stand. While Ilea would've considered the stands and platforms simple at best, it seemed the dwarves of

the Pit wanted flexibility more than provided comfort. Most of them had brought their own seats.

Ilea could see two dwarves in fine clothing, both sitting in old leather armchairs while smoking cigars. They were discussing something amongst themselves, not paying any attention to the cheers around them or the battle below.

Nearby, she spotted a group of dwarves who had set up a mobile forge similar to what Bralin had summoned down near the Soul Forge. Two damaged war machines were propped up with a few people arguing, one of them tapping a damaged section before he raised three fingers.

Farther back were entire stores made of wood or stone, buildings added to the uppermost level of the stands. Many had tables and benches set up in front of them, barrels of ale and bottles of various liquor standing between the plates of roasted meat.

Songs flowed into each other as various groups celebrated, while others were watching the battle in the pit below intently. The smells of fresh food and hot steel overshadowed the sweat and heat that gathered in the crowded dome.

When she heard the sound of bones breaking in between the shouts, cheers, and live music, Ilea turned to her right. Two shirtless dwarves were fist-fighting, a loud circle of people around them placing bets. She spotted Pierce among the mob placing her own bet, holding up several gold pieces with a broad grin on her face.

“I thought she was broke,” Ilea said with a glance at Verena.

The Elder had poured some whiskey into a small glass, smiling slightly as she took in the sights. She took a sip and glanced at the bottle. “Not bad.”

“She won a bet earlier,” Bralin supplied.

Ilea nodded. “So when we’re up, I assume we just jump down?” she asked, not seeing any doors or areas that would suggest changing rooms or really anything associated with a serious sports arena back on Earth.

“Yeah,” the dwarf said. “Just looking for a spot.”

“I can see well enough from up here,” Ilea said, tapping his shoulder before turning her attention to the pit.

Two dented and scratched war machines faced each other on the stone ground. The fighting area was entirely flat, a few sections scorched and cracked. The nearly two-meter-tall machines circled each other, one

wielding ice magic, the other a war hammer and a dented tower shield mounted to its left arm.

Ilea could tell from a glance that they were evenly matched, though she couldn't identify their levels from this distance. The pit was about four meters lower than the stands, with a low steel wall preventing the cheering people at the bottom from spilling onto the arena floor. Detailed rune work was visible right below the wall.

"Barrier enchantments?" she asked, looking down at Bralin.

Bralin was leading them through the crowds, navigating the sea of people and war machines with practiced ease. He said a few greetings to various people on the way, exchanging banter with those who commented on the two women on his shoulders.

"Yes. At least for stronger fighters," he said. "Plenty of accidents happen anyway, but the people closest to the fighting grounds know the risks. Quite a lot of gold in that area, too."

"They bet more?" Ilea asked.

"No – bets about how many people will get injured in the first few rows during any given fight. There are also bets on how much ale is drunk, as well as pretty much anything else you can measure."

"A lot of potential to fudge the numbers."

Bralin grinned. "That's what makes the whole affair so very enjoyable. The profits can be good, but if you're caught…"

"You say that like the risks are a good thing."

"The thrill is half the benefit," he said, finally finding an open section with a good view. Another much larger war machine had just left, and Bralin filled the space with a smooth motion.

Ilea kept an eye on the battle. She assumed the two were comparable to humans at around level one fifty. The war hammer user was both stronger and more experienced, but he was failing to corner the ice mage. Already, some people were booing. The mage focused too much on defense, their demeanor mostly reactive and always at a distance.

"They're gonna lose if they try anything else," Ilea said, summoning one of Keyla's meals. Luckily, her domain had the same benefits of keeping her food in a near-identical state to when it was stored. Otherwise, she would've upgraded her necklace to a pure food storage item.

"It's the name of the game. The Forged Dome doesn't pit assassins against each other but proud warriors of the Pit," Bralin explained. "Many

of the better divers rarely participate here, if ever. They're masters of evasion, trapping, explosives, cave-ins, and stealth."

Ilea gulped down a bite, watching the ice mage finally stand their ground, walls and spikes forming in front of their armor. "They'd probably be some of the most interesting fights to watch, though."

Bralin puffed. "Agreed. But most everyone here wouldn't be able to appreciate it, nor could they even comprehend what was happening. There are special occasions and funded battles with paid entrance only, but, as is the nature of things, people like that generally prefer to explore ancient ruins rather than showcase their abilities in the Dome. A shame, but direct battles between high-end war machines are quite enjoyable to watch as well."

"Do you participate? With your real machine, I mean," Ilea asked, using her telepathy.

"No. I'm quite content with the responsibilities and position I have. I'm done with the constant feuds," the dwarf replied.

She opened a bottle of ale. *"Understandable."*

A shield charge broke through the remaining barriers of ice, the war hammer impacting the armored mage first against their chest, then their head. They staggered back before a third strike made them fall. A heavy clang of metal on stone rang out as the crowd first cheered, then went silent.

The downed mage raised a hand with two fingers pointing upward. Cheers erupted again, followed by more cheers and curses as gold was exchanged between hundreds of people.

As the war hammer user jumped up into the stands, where they were welcomed by a group of celebrating dwarves, a group of mages jumped down into the pit. They evened out the few cracks left by the battle, earth magic easily getting rid of the indentations.

Ilea kept an eye on the downed mage, their arm falling to the side before they sat up and removed their helmet. She found she was gazing at a female dwarf, the blood on her brow evident as she stood up with staggering steps. She looked young, three braids of brown hair falling down into the neck of her war machine.

"No healers to check on her?" Ilea asked.

"Should be a few around, but they only go down there if it's bad," Bralin informed her.

Not enough healers. Just like everywhere else, it seems, she thought while drinking her ale. “Is Pierce next?”

“There’s a fifteen-minute pause. Then there should be another fight before hers.”

She leaned back, just barely stopping herself from forming an ashen chair. At least she had a shoulder, though she did note the strain her weight was putting on the dwarf.

Nice of him to bear that, she thought, but she slid off anyway, sitting down on the stairs instead.

A group of dwarves in front of her blocked the view, but her dominion had more than enough range to show her a few interesting things. The number of spells in the area was outright blinding, from infused war machines and weapons to small, easily overlooked spells hiding cards or coins and manipulating dice.

Fixing, hmm?

“I’ll be getting some food,” Ilea said and stood up.

“Didn’t you just eat?” Bralin asked.

She smiled and vanished, reappearing near the top of the stands. She found an empty spot at a long table and glanced at the dwarf behind the counter.

“Can I order from you?” she asked, her telepathy cutting right through all the music, talk, and song.

He didn’t seem too surprised, his brown eyes scanning the customers before they landed on her. He nodded and pointed up at the menu on a sign above his head.

“Your choice. Three plates,” she said. *“And ale.”*

The other dwarves sitting at the long table passed a full jug down until it landed in front of her, their conversation not interrupted by the gesture in the slightest. She drank deeply from the jug before setting it down.

Her food arrived as the cheers picked up again, but she didn’t care much about the two war-machine-wielding mages, who went at it like some of her resistance training partners.

She supposed it looked impressive, but after her many encounters with four-mark beings and her recent training with the Meadow, she certainly cared more about her food – a plate of greasy meat covered in spices. It was quickly devoured before the next one arrived.

“New in town?” a dwarf opposite her asked, ignoring his friend’s efforts to keep him quiet.

Ilea eyed him and continued eating. When she finished the second plate and moved on to the third, she simply nodded.

He laughed. “Haven’t eaten in days, eh?”

The dwarf at least had the courtesy of not bothering her again until she was done.

Good. My human brain is satisfied by this grease, fat, and salt.

“Still going at it,” she murmured before finishing her jug with one long swig.

“Too weak to join the battle against the Soul Wardens, so now they’re trying to show off here,” the dwarf said. “Hodir’s the name.”

[Explosion Mage – lvl 212]

“Ilea,” she answered, likely a better choice with the potential of her other name already being spread. “You were there?”

“Aye, tough machines. Saw the king myself, white wings of flame,” he said, taking a drink of his own.

“He was rather impressive. Even from a distance,” Ilea said. “Glad he took care of the invasion.”

Another dwarf turned around from the next table, nearly bumping into Hodir. “Hey… it was a woman, I tell you. Thick armor, but I saw the curves. Queen Nessa, I think.”

“Nessa was a water mage, you daft fucking shit,” someone else said.

Ilea smiled into her freshly filled jug.

“None of you heard of that southern thing called Lilipf? Ash an’ all, fire too,” one misguided individual suggested.

“No white fire there – she was using ash armor, dark, near black,” another voice chimed in.

“It was ash, I could tell,” Hodir said, now looking over his shoulder. “Who’s that Lilipf?”

“One with that name is up to fight soon,” another said before drinking.

“Bards in the south sing of her. A human, I think. Said she fought an entire army on her own,” someone said.

A few of them laughed. “Army of humans.”

“Could you fight an army of fucking humans?” another said.

The dwarf in question raised his mug with a grin. “Bring me one and I’ll show you.”

Ilea was sure he couldn’t, but she commended his bravery. She nearly used Monster Hunter to see how quickly he would shit his pants, but then she decided to keep to her subdued role of high-level human healer.

“Healer, too, that one. Battle healer, some say,” another said. “High level, no one knows what it is, though,” he added with a mysterious voice.

Hodir turned back to Ilea but found nobody there. A few coins had appeared on the counter, and one of the jugs was gone.

She enjoyed watching the ensuing chaos through her dominion. Most of the dwarves were laughing at Hodir, who stood up and argued with them vehemently. She did note that some were on the lookout for her, but a quick teleport and change of clothes would make it harder to find her. She donned a dark green cloak and hooded her face before she returned to the others.

“Good food?” Verena asked, still sitting on Bralin’s shoulder with a glass of whiskey in her hand.

“Greasy,” Ilea said. She drank from her jug and watched two dwarves down in the fighting pit pry a screaming individual out of a half-molten war machine, his injuries healed by a third dwarf who asked him repeatedly not to scream so loudly.

One of them had to give, she thought when an announcer called out the next participants.

“Now we have… is that right? Yes? Well… I suppose… a newcomer to the Forged Dome. Another one, but going by her name, she must be pretty impressive. The Dragonkiller!”

As his voice boomed through the dome, both cheers and boos rang out. Ilea noticed quite a few people remaining quiet within her dominion though, some glancing around or sharing a whisper with others.

Suppose I’m not the only one who’s met a dragon.

“How does this usually go in the Plains?” she asked Verena.

“Pierce is banned from most tournaments. I’m surprised she’s not known here.”

The Dragonkiller appeared about thirty meters above the stone pit, her armor blinking into existence around her before she fell and landed on the arena floor.

“She practiced that,” Ilea murmured.

Her armor crackled with blue lightning, and as she raised her hand toward the ceiling, a broad bolt of blue energy slammed down. The spell died out in crackling wisps, revealing a blade of steel, lightning flowing through its length as the woman swung it to the side.

Nice.

The crowd burst out into cheers and shouting, some figuratively losing their minds.

The Dragonkiller spread her arms wide and turned around.

“Yes… impressive. It seems we have the first owner of a Warden’s blade to participate in the Dome. Your opponent needs no introduction. Come forth, Grat the Destroyer!” the announcer shouted over the cheering crowd.

Ilea formed small beads of ash within her ears to dull the noise a little. She had enjoyed the magic shows back in Riverwatch much more than this testosterone-filled brawl pit. Watching them, that was. She very much wanted to jump down and rip her friend’s dark blue war machine apart.

‘ding’ Monstrous reaches lvl 7

Did someone identify me? Or was that just because I’m around other beings?

She didn’t react and quickly checked the skill. The new value was a hundred and ninety below her highest Class level. That meant no one below level three twenty could identify her without another spell or maybe the third tier. Veteran could give an impression, too.

Grat the Destroyer looked the part. He jumped down with his enormous war machine, towering above Pierce’s already large armor by nearly two meters. His had a solid core with added bits and pieces whose rusted edges jutted out.

In his arms, he held an oversized mace ending in a solid ball of steel. His movements were slow and strained, and the eyes set into his helmet glowed a deep red, while steam flowed out from a set of exhausts on his back.

“Is that really the speed he moves at?” Ilea asked.

Bralin had a broad grin on his face. “Yes,” he answered in an enthusiastic tone.

Ilea raised a brow. “You know he’s going to get ripped apart by her, right?”

“Yes. He lost me a lot of gold the last two times he fought. I’ve bet a lot on Pierce. The odds were eight to one when I bet.”

Oh yeah, right. I forgot to bet anything.

“What are the odds now? Or are they closed for betting already?”

“Too late now,” Bralin said. “But if you want me to bet on your fight, I could still do that.”

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SIXTY-EIGHT

Bets

“Here you go, all on Lilith,” Ilea said, taking off her bracelet. She funneled in seven hundred gold coins, almost everything she had with her. “Can I give you access to the storage item?”

“You have to touch me, then connect the mana flow with me,” Bralin said.

She did as he said, the process mostly intuitive, before she handed him the bracelet.

The dwarf rushed off as Grat the Destroyer greeted his rabid fanbase. He held up his mace to roaring cheers before he slowly turned toward his opponent.

“So, Class level is taken into account,” Verena said, now standing next to Ilea.

Ilea nodded. “Seems like it, yeah. Can’t wait to find out who my opponent is. Kinda want to go against Pierce, but she’d just leave her armor behind and annoy the shit out of me until I did the same.”

“Probably, yeah,” Verena said, sipping on her drink.

Bralin returned thirty seconds later and handed the now-empty bracelet back to Ilea. “Back in time,” he grinned.

“Thanks,” Ilea said. “What were the odds?”

“Ten to one,” Bralin said with a smile.

“They can pay that out if I win?” she asked, her brow raised.

“No. Probably not. But you’ll be able to get treasure, housing, or just debt with interest.”

Ilea nodded to herself as she watched Grat walk toward the Elder, each slow step menacing and supported by the cheers of hundreds.

Pierce seemed to be done with the games and raised her sword, a dozen floating bolts of lightning forming around her as she took flight, armor and all. Her speed wasn’t as ludicrous as without all the weight, but given the size of her opponent’s large machine, it hardly mattered.

She barrelled toward him and slowed, moving to the ground and landing with bent knees. Her bolts sizzled into Grat’s heavy armor, leaving a few bits scorched as the lightning simply dissipated.

Gravity, of course.

Pierce had stopped entirely, her armor shaking as she struggled to look up at her opponent.

Grat stepped closer and raised his mace. “Goodbye, Dragonkiller,” he grunted, the weapon coming down, pulled by gravity magic.

The Elder stepped aside just before the mace crashed to the ground, her movement still slowed but fluid. The stone ground was cracked and broken, shrapnel flying everywhere. Pierce touched the metal weapon with her armored hand.

“Just kidding,” she said as lightning arced around his mace, the energy traveling up and toward the large machine’s arm. He let go of it before it reached him, taking a step back as Pierce advanced toward him.

She evaded a stomp and cut into the steel with her blade. Sparks of lightning flared, her laughter loud and raucous as she increased the frequency of her strikes.

“I thought you were the Berserker,” Ilea said, watching Pierce strip steel away from the machine’s leg bit by bit.

The crowd had calmed down. Murmurs and complaints were audible, along with a few much louder cheers. Bralin was one of those cheering loudest, his bellowing voice rivaling the mad laughter of Pierce.

Grat’s leg nearly came off when the massive machine reached down with two swiping arms. The dwarf grabbed the smaller war machine and started pressing down, magic visible around his grip.

Bad idea, Ilea thought as Pierce stilled.

The Dragonkiller made her sword vanish, her arms restrained as she tilted her head to the side. Then her entire armored form burst into bright

blue lightning. She pushed the hands holding onto her aside, the large war machine staggering back a step.

Pierce raised her arms, all the energy around her now coursing through her own armor. Bits of steel fell off, her entire form slightly squished by the gravity magic of her opponent. She brought her arms forward, a flash of blue light flaring to life in a beam of lightning that cut directly into the chest of the larger war machine.

She shrugged her shoulders, more pieces falling away, then flicked her wrist with her sword in hand, lightning once more flowing through the steel as she advanced on the damaged machine. A single powerful strike severed the last bit connecting Grat's leg to his foot. Pierce jumped on top of her falling foe and raised her sword toward the machine's neck.

Grat raised both arms in response, and though one was pierced by the sword, he grabbed one of Pierce's armored legs with his other hand. Lightning coursed through him as he brought her war machine down onto the stone ground. He flicked his wrist to get rid of the sword, and the blade clattered to the floor.

He turned around, unable to stand up due to his missing leg, yet still grasped the lightning-charged war machine in his other hand. Raising his arm, he proceeded to slam the Elder down into the ground again and again, more metal breaking away with each attack.

Ilea looked over Grat's shoulder and smiled. *That probably won't make you very popular,* she thought, seeing the smiling Elder watch as her war machine got reduced to a krangled mess.

Pierce waited until the large machine had worked the stolen armor down to an empty husk of bent and broken steel before jumping up to his head and ripping the thing off with her bare hands. He raised his arms, letting go of her armor's remains, but not before a bright burst of lightning burned down into the insides of his war machine.

The Elder stepped onto the nape of the massive machine as the thing came crashing down with a loud clatter, hopping off to boos and cheers alike. She grabbed the remains of her armor and dragged it along before she bent down and raised the massive sword without issue. She smiled as it flared with bright, crackling lightning once more.

She hefted the massive sword with both hands, and the crowd shouted obscenities as she proceeded to cleave chunks off her enemy's armor with all the grace of an experienced butcher. Her sword vanished into her storage

item before she reached into a cut-open section and dragged out the unconscious Grat, a large, muscly dwarf. She threw him aside and raised her fist in triumph.

Bralin grinned. The show had apparently been just enough to change the crowd's overall mood. Healers jumped down to check the dwarf, but he was already coughing and muttering to himself.

"She did well," Bralin said.

"Her war machine was thrashed," Ilea said.

"Yes. It added to the show," the dwarf said. "I might even get my winnings."

All about the show then, hmm?

The announcer's voice boomed across the Dome again about ten minutes later.

"And now for another spectacle. A newcomer to the arena, one taking the name of a southern myth from human lands. Lilith herself!"

Most everyone just talked amongst themselves, sharing what they had heard or thought her to be. Ilea couldn't hear a single conversation suggesting that she was the one who had fought the Soul Wardens.

Just that hard to believe, hmm?

She stood up and downed the rest of her ale. The jug vanished as she cracked her neck.

"Do you want to know anything about your opponent?" Bralin asked. "You just bet a ridiculous sum of gold on winning."

"If they manage to beat me, they deserve the gold," Ilea said before she vanished.

She summoned her armaments in the split second it took her to appear. A few observant watchers would've surely spotted her hooded form, but she didn't much care. After this fight was over, the name of Lilith would likely spread one way or another. And she planned to procure the Taleen key through these arena battles.

Just gotta win until I beat the current Champion.

"…will have the unfortunate task of facing none other than Omdir Stonewirt!"

As the announcer finished, the whole Dome erupted with cheers.

Ilea looked around through the slit in her helmet. Her weight slowly increased as she prepared for the fight. She didn't plan on casting any of the

flashy spells she had used to fight the Soul Wardens, but if the guy managed to push her far enough to force her, she wouldn't hold back.

"In celebration of the Soul Wardens' defeat, Omdir will once again grace us with his magic and expertise. This will be the first battle of many, so make yourselves comfortable and feast on the might that is living steel!"

Ilea watched as a dwarf casually flew down onto the stone ground. He wore well-made clothes but nothing flashy, emerald eyes taking her in as he landed. Long braided black hair and a trimmed but thick beard adorned his face. The dwarf was nearly as tall as she was, his muscles were clearly visible despite his modest attire, and the scars on his face were well-hidden but there nonetheless.

Just the way he landed already told her quite a lot about his strength and balance. His heartbeat remained calm, none of the loud cheering, the excitement of battle, or the opponent in front of him fazing the dwarf in the slightest.

"Lilith of the south, I greet you," he said and bowed his head.

She did the same in her armor. "Omdir of the north."

The look in his eyes turned curious, then cautious. Changes so slight she could only tell thanks to both her enhanced eyes and her dominion.

Feels like I can judge his expertise, but he can tell which shoelace I prefer to tie first.

He spread his arms, a thrum of magic spreading out with him at the center. His eyes turned serious as dark steel formed around him. A creator. As he floated up by a meter, the steel turned into arms, legs, a helmet. Chunks of enchanted tech appeared from a storage item, all of it incorporated into the growing form of a war machine three meters in height but somewhat slender in design. It reminded her more of Terok's machine.

The armor came together, links flowing into one another with perfect seams. His body was soon covered with several layers of enchanted metal that glowed bright within her dominion – before it was all covered by another layer of dark steel.

He raised his open palm to the crowd. Everything went quiet.

Not just a dwarf. A legend, Ilea thought with a broad grin. *What a perfect first stage*.

The magical light of the Forged Dome reflected off his armor in mesmerizing patterns. Parts of it seemed to absorb the light entirely, while others shimmered with brilliant, flowing motions. He walked toward her

with slow steps, his demeanor not yet suggesting battle. Ilea mimicked his behavior, her steps slow and heavy compared to his light and downright nimble ones.

Speed could be a problem. With him being a creator and all, his suit isn't just plates of steel but comparable to my mantle. Ah well. It'll be a good show anyway. And I can slow him down if it gets too annoying. Not like many would recognize Space Manipulation, let alone connect it to anything I did against the Wardens.

They stopped a few meters apart. His machine had no eyes, the helmet a design of links and plates.

[Nulram Steel Mage – lvl 330]

"Impressive," she sent to him through her telepathy. *"And you seem to be some kind of local legend."*

The crowd remained quiet.

"A three-mark human. I didn't dare hope you would live up to the tales. But it seems I was mistaken. Let us show them what it means to do battle, Lilith," the dwarf sent back, his voice steady.

Is that a hint of excitement?

She raised her arm and summoned her Blade of the Warden, the steel glowing with heat before lines of molten rock formed down its length.

"Ready when you are," she sent.

The large war machine bent down and jumped back, landing with barely an impact nearly thirty meters away. Dense magic flowed around his arms as he prepared his spells, blades of steel appearing from thin air all around him.

Barriers flickered to life at the edge of the stands, sweeping upward across the dome before finally connecting above to cover the entire field.

Guess we can let loose.

Ilea looked at her glowing lava blade. It wasn't quite as impressive as her fire one, but it would do. She considered using her Ice and Earth Manipulation to send a few projectiles his way, but seeing the dozens of blades floating in unison above his machine made her pause. She didn't want to insult his ability. He knew she was a three-mark.

And so she pointed her sword at him and started walking.

The crowd stayed quiet until Omdir raised his arm. A bright sphere of light formed in front of his massive steel palm. It glowed with a sun-like radiance before a beam expanded outward and struck her leg near instantly.

Ilea raised a brow. He was testing her defenses. *How considerate,* she thought with a smile.

His beam barely left any noticeable damage. He moved the ongoing spell to her chest and put more mana behind it.

She kept her steps slow, her healing now occasionally activating to repair the slight damage from the powerful sun beam. She watched him add his other hand to the mix, the intensity of the spell doubling.

Ilea didn't slow. Neither did she raise a hand nor form a shield.

Let's give them a show…

* * *

"This one really challenged the current champion?" Verena asked. She swirled her glass and took another sip of whiskey.

Bralin nodded, his arms crossed as he watched the ridiculous display. Everyone around them was shouting and cheering.

Omdir had started with his usual single beam against opponents he hadn't fought before. Anyone who failed against it would be deemed unworthy to be his opponent. Evading the spell entirely was nearly impossible; only a few in the Pit were even capable of such a feat.

Bralin wondered if Ilea could dodge the spell with speed alone – without her armor, that was. He had only seen her fight without it once. The flying stone and debris the Meadow had summoned had certainly been fast, but he was fairly sure that light magic moved faster. Either way, it didn't seem to matter; the living armor advanced with casual steps as the beam continued to intensify.

Some of the people around them were questioning Ilea's decision not to create or summon a shield of some sort, just to avoid some of the damage.

They have no idea how terribly outclassed Omdir is in this battle, Bralin thought as the dwarf stopped his beam. His evaluation was done. Lilith was an opponent he would face with everything he had. The crowd knew it, too, their excitement palpable, and those who had watched simply with a hint of interest now turned their full attention to the fighting pit.

Ilea didn’t stop her approach as her opponent began to move. He kept the distance between them the same as the flying blades above his machine started to glow with light. He sent them flying, the sound of dull impacts filling the arena a moment later when the projectiles clashed with the heavy living armor. Some were deflected, but nearly thirty managed to gain purchase. None sank in quite to the hilt, but some managed to get about halfway there.

“Not bad,” Verena said. “He’s around our level, you said?”

“Yes, but his blades are notoriously dangerous,” Bralin explained. “Everyone who has fought against him either evaded or blocked his steel with their own magic. Nobody has taken such a… direct approach. Well, Halwart did… to an extent.”

The crowd’s reaction was amusing, but he couldn’t quite share the same wonder. Not after having seen her fight with everything she had.

Omdir raised his arm in an attempt to lift her up by the blades stuck in her armor, but the effort seemed to fail. Ilea still walked toward him, ripping out the blades with her left hand. She threw them aside, the steel clattering to the ground before it started floating once more.

“What’s she doing?” Bralin asked, watching as the blades now moved in horizontal patterns. Their edges glowed with light, cutting into the living armor in a storm of steel. The whistling sound of hundreds of impacts was audible even through the barrier.

Verena glanced his way before she appeared on his shoulder once again. “He was testing her before,” she said. “Now it’s her turn.”

* * *

Ilea ripped out another six blades, their power diminishing greatly once the light magic stored within was gone. She could absorb part of it with Sentinel Core once they were close enough. None had managed to get to her mantle yet, but she assumed it was just a matter of time. There were simply too many attacks happening at once for her to repair all of her massive armor.

Compared to the monsters she had faced below, Omdir would go for the throat. He wouldn’t melt half her armor or try to cut through her entire helmet. He would try to get to her real head, heart, or spine. Already, she

recognized the concentrated effort to find weak spots as he cut away at her regenerating defenses.

But you'll need more than that.

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SIXTY-NINE

Deals

Ilea watched the storm of blades in her dominion, the image reminding her of a blizzard. It was blinding, not because of the light magic, but because of the mana infused into all the moving parts. It was mesmerizing. The performance of a master mage, his dance of death, acted out with flying blades of light and steel.

A rhythm flowed through it all, an overpowering might, inevitable death. He had her where he wanted her, had her where he would've thought an enemy to be at the end of their battle.

But her war machine still stood. It stood with a thousand cuts. The slit that allowed her to see was closed once more; she'd needed to prevent his attempts to slip razor-thin sheets of sharp steel through the opening. Her dominion had more than enough range to keep an eye on his moving form and to react to such tactics. He had never stopped, constantly moving to keep her at a distance while keeping enough space behind his back to maneuver.

Doesn't that go against the whole idea of a direct approach? Or has there simply not been anyone left standing once this storm of blades actually reached their armor?

It was impressive but ultimately inconsequential. Omdir simply didn't have the required power to take her down. She stopped moving and lowered her blade. His storm went on, shaving bits of steel from her knees, neck, and shoulders. Weak spots he tried to capitalize on.

Let's make this a little more interesting. The people want a show, after all.

"Are you done with your games?" she asked, her booming voice echoing through the dome. The crowd quieted down after the first few words in an attempt to hear her. "Or is this the extent of your power?"

He reacted. Perhaps not because of her provocation but in answer to the waiting crowd. A spear of metal formed above his machine's head, both arms raised as magic flowed into the creation. The tip had a drill bit added to it, the whole thing four meters in length and nearly thirty centimeters in diameter.

The projectile glowed within her magic perception. Ilea opened the slit in her helmet to see the creation, the storm around her still cutting into her defenses.

"Are you sure about this?" Omdir asked through their telepathic connection. *"I do not intend to kill you,"* he added, the words neither prideful nor mocking.

Ilea layered her mantle below her armaments. She watched the spear as it started to spin, more mana flowing into it with every passing second. Her sword vanished, and she opened her arms in a welcoming gesture.

"If it gets all the way through, it's your win."

He didn't hesitate. The spear shot out with incredible speed, a sonic boom rocking the arena when it was halfway to her war machine. The drill bit penetrated her weakened steel defenses with ease, but when it crashed against her mantle, it came to an immediate stop. Ilea skidded backward, coming to a stop a few meters away.

"You know," she sent, grabbing the spear and ripping it out as the steel reformed below, *"I expected more punching when I entered this… competition."* She threw the bent and broken weapon away. *"But it's just the same magic tricks. Time and time again."*

Opening her arms wide once again, she used her Space Manipulation to push on all the blades around her. They spun out of their choreographed dance and clattered both against the ground and the barrier above. Some people in the crowd jumped back in case the defenses broke.

"I fight to win," the dwarf said and jumped back yet again. Another spear formed above his head as he landed.

Ilea charged the open valves in her massive boots with Tempered Seal, adding heat and mana for several seconds. As she aimed her left hand at her

opponent, her sword appeared in her right one. Molten rock formed at the edge before two simultaneous explosions propelled her up and forward. She controlled her fall with Space Manipulation as well as she could, considering the weight. Just barely, she managed to land on her feet with a loud crash a few meters away from Omdir's war machine.

The spear above him had charged up and was spinning with increasing velocity before it shot down, aimed at her armor's neck. Her arm still raised, she used her charged-up Space Manipulation to push against the incoming framework.

A shockwave rushed out with a deafening boom, and the spear stopped in the air and crushed into itself like a tin can. As it bent and splintered, Ilea moved past it with faster steps than before, her glowing sword slashing upward and into Omdir's right shoulder from below.

The impact lifted his war machine by a few centimeters, but the blade failed to cut through the entirety of his arm. He seemed slightly dazed from the impact nonetheless, enough for her to close her left fist and punch.

Her intrusion spells were converted into pure physical power, the speed of her fist increasing severalfold before it dug into his chest with a dull crack. Bits and pieces of metal flew to the side and his larger war machine was sent flying, slamming into the stone ground three times before he crashed into the arena wall with an explosion of sound and debris.

As Ilea walked toward the downed machine, checking his vitals, the crowd was entirely silent. He was injured, but his machine had taken the brunt of the force. His and her own. The converted mana intrusion attack wasn't exactly made to be used from within a set of living armor. It had strained both her body and the armaments around it, though the damage to her own armor was healed before she had taken a single heavy step.

"Are you alive in there?" she asked.

He didn't reply. Instead, he coughed, the sound dull from beneath his many layers of enchanted protection. Several bits had broken from the single punch, but he forced himself to get up, new layers already forming as the damage was repaired.

"Stop toying with me, Lilith," he said, blades with glowing edges coming to life around him. He favored his right leg, and one of his hands looked limp, despite the armor on top. It was still him who controlled the large monstrosity, after all.

She stopped walking and raised her arm. A look up at the spectators was enough to make them scurry out of the way, despite the barrier. *“You don’t want that, Omdir Stonewirt.”*

The blades flew toward her, but they were all blown away when a wave of space magic shook the ground and crashed into the war machine, the wall, and the barrier above. Part of it shattered, and the stands behind shook.

Omdir was sent flying once again. He hit the wall right behind him, cracks spidering out through the stone and compressing the dwarf within his own creation. His body was about to give when he teleported out, just before Ilea would’ve attempted to do it for him.

He fell to one knee, coughing up blood as he stared at her. Metal formed around him before Ilea pulled him toward her. She caught the dwarf with one large hand and held her glowing sword to his neck. The heat alone burned his skin, but he simply stared her down.

“Surrender,” she said, her booming voice moving through the silent dome.

The dwarf allowed himself a grin, his eyes locking with hers as a set of sharp needles formed right before her face.

Her precognition picked up the attack, but she simply let it happen. The steel needles sank into her eyes through the still-open slit in her helmet, penetrating several centimeters into her head as the dwarf, still held in her grip, formed moving blades and armor all around him.

“You do fight to win,” she said.

His eyes went wide at her lack of reaction to the injury. Then her blade vanished, and she grabbed his leg with her right hand and slammed him down into the stone. Bits of metal went flying, the few blades he had managed to send into her armor simply ignored.

She hauled him back up and slammed him down again. This time, she heard cracks; his leg was broken at the very least. He remained conscious, though, and it seemed pain didn’t much bother him.

A third strike left his body messed up, the shock enough to render him unconscious. Ilea finally let go of his leg, keeping an eye on his vitals to make sure he didn’t die. He was only at level three hundred, after all.

She raised her lava sword to the crowd, and as the barrier came down, the first cheers rang out, soon changing to a torrent of appreciative screams.

Surprising, for a group that's just lost a shit ton of gold. They came for the show, I guess, she thought, looking back at her beaten, twitching opponent.

Two healers had landed nearby, their area spells quickly stabilizing him. He would be fine. A headache, maybe, but at three hundred, he likely had plenty of skills and resistances to deal with such injuries.

Ilea stored her armor, revealing her cloaked form to the masses as Omdir coughed.

"I'm fine," he murmured to the healers, gesturing for them to leave, his clothes blood-soaked and ruined. They were replaced in a flash. The dwarf cracked his neck as he stood up, stumbling on his broken leg before he stabilized himself.

"Well fought," she said, pulling the needles out from her eyes. One after the other, they clinked to the ground.

"Who are you? And what do you want from us?" Omdir asked.

She smiled at him, pulling her hood a little closer to her nose. "What do you mean? I'm Lilith, and I came to fight in the Forged Dome."

A set of impacts shook the stone behind her, a group of seven large and decorated war machines landing in tandem.

"She's a three-mark, Helwart," Omdir said. He remained where he stood. Calm but ready to fight again.

"Aye, I can see that, Om. And she beat the shit out of you," said Helwart, the Champion of the Pit and its leader. Or the closest thing they had to something like that, according to Bralin. "Now get the hell out of this fucking pit, or I'll finish what she was too merciful to do."

Omdir ignored the comments. "Well fought, Lilith," he said and walked away.

"Don't give me that cold fucking shoulder, you git!" Helwart shouted. His war machine made the ground shake as he took a few steps after the dwarf. "I warned you about those fucking needles! If you kill your next opponents, consider yourself banned for a year!"

Ilea had taken a step to the side in an attempt to avoid the large leg of Helwart's war machine, which was painted in dull orange, cuts and dents visible all over. It was about as tall as her armaments and just as broad.

"So, three-mark. Ready for a fight?" he asked, turning toward her as a large mace of the same dull orange metal appeared in his steel hands. The head of the weapon housed seven saw blades covered in dried blood.

She grinned. “Against all seven of you?”

[Saw Berserker – lvl 345]

“Not enough space for that here,” Helwart said. “Kall’s magic gets in the way, too, and when I’m excited, you’ll need all six of ’em to stop me. Just me, Lilith. Just me. And none of that space shit. Just your fists.”

One of the others sighed, while two looked at each other and shook their heads. His guards, perhaps?

“You’re the Champion of the Pit, right?” Ilea asked.

Conversations had started again in the crowd, many still cheering her name.

“Aye, some call me that. But I don’t much care. Pit needs a strong head. These fucking idiots would start murdering each other in a heartbeat if it wasn’t for me. Not that I like the bloody job,” he complained.

“Helwart, you hardly do any bloody work,” a dwarf in a stonehammer war machine said in a defeated tone.

The Champion shook his head. “See? Just complaints. I do the fucking work when it’s necessary. Shit’s running well, isn’t it? Until the Soul Wardens, that is,” he said, turning his head back to Ilea. “So, up for another fight? Otherwise, why are you here?”

“I want one artifact from the city if I win.”

“Be specific, woman, none of those political games. What do you want?”

She looked at him for a moment before she gestured to the people around him.

“Leave us be,” he spat. “And move the schedule.”

The six other war machines voiced their complaints, three of them throwing insults at him that he countered with his own.

Ilea waited until they had jumped, flown, or climbed up to the stands before she spoke again. She didn’t use telepathy. She had an inkling he wouldn’t like that.

“An enchanted key. Taleen made.”

“Ah. Been wondering when that old thing would come in handy,” he said. “One of the more obscure treasures lying around.”

“Come in handy? I was told I’d get it if I succeeded in the Dome. Barely anything more impressive than a fight against the current Champion, is there?”

The dwarf chuckled to himself, shouldering his large mace. “You destroyed the Wardens. Would’ve been a good fight, but yes, many would’ve died. You’re a healer, Lilith. Helping us is a choice many would not have made. I respect that. And I appreciate you not stealing what you came to find. Plenty of high-level pricks forget their manners. Elves are the worst, but humans aren’t great either. Rambling rambling, I am. The Iron Key is yours if you beat me fair and square. I’ll be using my magic and mace, you’ll be using your healing an’ fists only.”

Ilea smiled at him. “No restrictions for you, and I get reduced to half my arsenal?” she asked in a dry tone.

The dwarf cackled. “Can’t exactly face a bloody fucking god on equal terms, now can I? White flame of old and space magic of all things? Give me a break. I wouldn’t even be able to reach you. You want a fight, those are the terms.”

“Fair enough. I accept. Only fists and healing,” she said with a smirk.

He pointed a finger at her. “No offensive healing either.”

“You’re no fun. How did you even know I had that?”

“I do now.”

He raised his mace, the saw blades within starting to spin as stone armor formed around his war machine. The whole thing grew by another meter in every dimension, the stone grinding and cracking as it grew denser.

“Now get this thing started!” he shouted through a voice module.

“The Champion has taken to the pit!” the announcer said, his voice a bit shaken. He did sound more excited than before, though. “I’m told he’ll be fighting Lilith herself in a brawl to unconsciousness, death, or until one of them surrenders.”

The announcer exchanged a few words with one of the war machines that had previously been standing behind Helwart.

“No official bets on this one, as we’re starting right now.”

* * *

The chaos started immediately. Everyone ran around to make high-stakes private bets with others.

Bralin would have to sit this one out, mostly. They had made a ridiculous sum on both Pierce’s and Ilea’s fights, as long as they could collect. Either way, he was already on very thin ice, with very heavy boots.

If he bet on this one too, he would have a few assassins on his ass by tomorrow.

“Where’s Toll?” he murmured as he started wading through the frantic crowd of idiots.

“Is this normal?” Verena asked from atop his shoulder.

“Some high-ranking dwarves interrupt the proceedings from time to time. Helwart can do whatever the fuck he wants,” he said. “Toll!!”

He finally spotted the golden war machine in the distance. He had to make this one count.

“Willing to bet, you old fart?” he asked when he reached the dwarf in question.

“With you? Always,” said Toll.

Bralin had lost the last eight bets against him, which would only feed his arrogant confidence. He had to admit the dwarf was good with his predictions, but today he had two things on his side. One, the absolute confidence Toll had in Helwart, and two, his knowledge of what the fuck Lilith really was.

He made the deal, adding gold from the projected winnings of the previous two fights. A risk, sure. But what was life without risks?

“Are you guys for hire?” he asked Verena as they walked back to their spot. Ilea and Helwart still seemed to be talking, the defensive barrier raised again in preparation for the fight.

“Not really,” Verena said. “Why?”

“Hmm. Gonna be a rough few weeks for me after this bloody mess is over. And I’ll be a whole lot richer.”

“Didn’t think you cared that much.”

He grinned. “Verena, it’s not about what I have. It’s about what they lose.”

She smiled and poured herself another glass.

* * *

“Let them finish their bets, or I’ll never hear the end of it,” Helwart said, using another voice module that was considerably less loud.

“Sure.”

Funny. I’m facing the de facto leader of the Pit here, and he’s having me restrict what magic I can use. Reminds me of my meeting with King Eilhart.

The influence I have is reaching ridiculous heights.

Which also means… I mean, why not?

"Hey, while I have you here," Ilea said. "Are you interested in a potential alliance with Hallowfort and Ravenhall, and maybe some other human cities?"

"Hmm. Human cities? Hallowfort I know. I don't see why not, but the distance… Ah. Hence the key. Of course it would be humans to figure out the gates."

"You're quick for a mace-wielding berserker," she said with a smile.

"Yes, yes, they all call old Helwart stupid until I smash their brains in. No reasonable town in all of Elos would refuse a deal if it meant reliable long-range teleportation. If what you have is real, you've got them allll by the balls. We'll find an arrangement. The Pit owes you anyway. Heard you saved a bunch of old folks, too. My great-grandad came knockin'. Never thought there was a chance that he was still alive."

"That's why the Wardens attacked. A mind magic creature was keeping them down there," she explained.

He nodded. "Aye. Explains your quick return. Another minute for the bets?"

Ilea summoned her war machine and teleported up to sit on its shoulder, flicking open a bottle of ale. "A minute? Sure."

An alliance, hmm? Hallowfort and Ravenhall have already made contact, but I think Helwart is right. With long-range teleportation, who could refuse at least some kind of deal? Especially with how much monster-infested wilderness is between these distant settlements.

I hope Claire and the others are fine with this. But the Pit doesn't seem too bad. And they'd have a ton of things to trade. Their knowledge of enchantments and war machines alone is worth a lot.

And cannons for Ravenhall.

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SEVENTY

Brawl

Ilea finished her bottle before she teleported into her armor. She raised her fists in preparation, feeling the power of her auras flowing through her. Whatever the Champion of the Pit threw at her, she was ready.

"Let's get this started, then," Helwart said through a booming sound enhancer much like hers. He raised his saw-bladed mace and crouched in a fighter's stance.

The crowd stopped their betting and turned toward the combatants as the announcer gave them a short countdown.

Let's see what you can do, Champion.

Ilea walked forward, and her foe did the same. Neither of their sets of armor was designed to be exceptionally quick. The layer of stone around him broadened with each step, his mace coming at her in a horizontal strike as soon as she stepped into his range.

Ilea felt the impact on her arm; the power wasn't enough to throw her off balance, but the weapon won out against her living armor, ripping into her steel with heavily enchanted saw blades. Sparks flew amid chunks of steel as she closed the distance, charging destruction. She delivered a purely physical punch, which slammed through several instantly appearing walls of stone before finally crashing against his armor.

She didn't consider it cheating.

Well, maybe a little bit.

But it was fun.

The impact made the ground tremble, and the crowd erupted into cheers. Helwart used the momentum from the punch to take a few steps back, swinging his mace at her leg this time. Too quick for her to dodge with her increased weight, the strike nearly took the massive limb out from under her, and she stumbled to the side to stay on her feet.

“That thing isn’t just a mace,” she murmured when another strike ripped out a chunk of her armored knee, and Ilea was forced to kneel as she healed the damage. She could feel the magic around him, the power flowing through both his war machine and his mace, all connected and intertwined. He wasn’t using a tool; this was all him, as in control of his armor as Omdir had been.

Helwart kept the distance between them but stepped to her side to deliver a heavy strike with the mace at her chest. A pulse of mana surged out as the weapon accelerated, a boom resounding before it even struck. The impact itself caused a loud crash of steel against steel. It dug halfway into her armor and got stuck.

Ilea felt her entire body vibrate with the strike, cracks ripping through the ground below her. *Shock absorption is coming in handy*. The hit was comparable to the strike of a four-mark. It seemed Helwart had focused on two things: his stone armor and how to hit really, really hard.

Too bad I’m indestructible.

Ilea remained motionless, the heavy chunk of bladed steel stuck in her chest as she moved her hands up to keep it there, but she blinked in surprise when her opponent immediately let go of the weapon. Instead, he simply walked closer and punched her.

Another shockwave tore through her, his next attack a hook to her back, followed by three punches into her neck. Each strike sounded like an artillery shell going off. Bits of debris were sent flying as her armor was pushed deeper into the stone below, and his fists started to leave dents in her living steel, the mana flow around him increasing.

As she tried to stand up, a kick sent her stumbling. Helwart ripped the mace out of her chest before she watched him twirl with the weapon, the momentum and magic in his body sending the thing straight into the same spot again, only deeper this time.

Ilea felt herself lifted from the ground by the sheer force of the impact. Another shockwave rippled outward before she landed a few meters away.

Her knee had healed, but her chest looked more than a little dented, deep cuts left from the blades added to his mace.

Helwart didn't give her a moment. His movements were now more fluid than before, every step perfectly chosen and executed, the range of his weapon taken into account before another strike caved in her right knee.

She could see what he was doing, his movements still rather slow compared to her non-titan form, but with her basic level of control over her living armor, she simply had no way to respond. His technique thoroughly outclassed her war machine expertise, and with his higher speed and ability to take out her legs, she had no clue how to beat him in her armor.

Three more strikes took out her leg entirely, leaving her stranded yet again. Ilea watched him spin with his mace in hand, the dwarf completing four turns before an insanely high-momentum strike crashed through the arms she held up and into her half-repaired chest. Another few hits like that, and he would be through to her real form.

She heard the crowd roar with each hit. Her eyes followed the massive machine through the slit in her helmet. Looking down, she saw her hands were missing; they were regenerating with her healing, but not faster than his increasingly dangerous attacks.

As the mace was ripped out yet again, she was pulled bodily forward. The next strike came from above. Her precognition informed her of the incoming attack pretty much as it happened. Her metal helmet caved in with a sickening crunch, whirling steel blades ripping through the rest of the metal before they ground to a halt against her head.

Ilea didn't cover herself in ash, but her mantle remained active near her neck.

"You may surrender, before you die," Helwart said as he ripped the mace from her helmet, his massive steel and stone arms raised for another strike against her chest.

Ilea grinned. *"I did agree not to use my magic. But you know,"* she sent via telepathy as she made her damaged armor vanish, *"I didn't agree to keep this a war-machine-only fight."*

Some of the crowd went silent, but this time, they didn't dare boo or insult her as they had with Pierce.

"You plan to teleport round and round, then?" Helwart asked in a booming voice.

Ilea smiled. "No, no, I agreed to keep this… physical."

His mace came at her and slammed into her raised arms, the blades grinding to a halt instantly as a wave of force pushed out behind her, her boots digging into the stone below. Her weight remained at its absolute maximum, but she could easily keep up with the massive machine now that she didn’t have to haul over a ton of enchanted steel around.

She raised an eyebrow and glanced up at the large being. “Aw, I appreciate it, Champion. But you shouldn’t pull your punches.”

The crowd had now gone entirely silent, as if they couldn’t quite comprehend what had just happened.

Ilea knew the unwritten rules against fighting without a war machine were really there to prevent constant dodging more than anything else. So she didn’t. Instead, she charged up Archon Strike and let her enemy attack once more. As the mace came from her left, Ilea twisted her body before her fist moved out, the charged attack, coupled with Tempered Seal, converted into pure physical damage.

It was still probably cheating. But she didn’t much care. This was more fun than the alternatives.

Her fist collided with the mace, and the two forces met with an ear-shattering boom, a crack forming in the stone beneath the impact. Ilea held onto her hood with her left hand as the air was pushed aside, the shockwave even impacting the barrier above.

One of the blades in the mace had shattered, bits and pieces whipping away in the wind. She healed the internal damage done to her arm; the combined efforts of his attack and her own overextension had burst a few blood vessels.

Ilea raised her hand as Helwart moved his mace away. The dwarf had been stunned by the impact, his arms shaking as part of the force fed back through him. Blood dripped from the back of her hand; her bones were intact, but some of her skin had been torn up from the fast-moving blade.

Helwart growled and struck down from above. Ilea spread her arms as the heavy steel came down on her head. Her body didn’t give, nor did the mace. Instead, it was the ground itself that cracked, a wide swath of fissures spreading through the vicinity.

She felt the impact shiver through her, her clothes ruined as the stone exploded all around her, debris peppering her unarmored form. She summoned her bone armor set; the slowly regenerating piece would allow at least some level of decency.

Until it too is destroyed, she thought, keeping her head uncovered.

She looked up at the armored titan and smiled, a trickle of blood running down from her head, the wound it had come from already healed.

I think you skipped some of my turns there, she thought, running up the small slope his strike had created.

The mace came at her, but she simply let it strike. The impact moved her heavy form a few meters, cracks forming on her bone armor, but most of the force was absorbed by her heavily enhanced body. She reached Helwart's large stone-covered form and started with a kick to the back of his knee.

Her intrusion abilities were converted into physical damage. The thick stone shattered under the heavy impact, his leg pushed to the ground before she kicked three more times, the metal below bending and shattering.

Helwart let go of his weapon and punched down. His massive fist met hers, stone and metal devouring her arm as his defenses cracked and splintered. She ripped out her fist and elbowed his other hand aside. Eight quick punches slammed into his armored stomach, bits of stone exploding away from his back as the force traveled through him.

She looked down at her ruined bone bracers before she refocused on her foe. The massive being was stumbling back with a ruined knee and one arm reduced to a stump.

Still got my Wyrm armor.

As new stone formed around the damaged areas, he regained his footing. Ilea smirked when he roared, the sound muffled through the steel and stone, his sound-enhancing tool destroyed from the vibrations that had ripped through him.

She went into a defensive Azarinth stance as the massive being descended upon her with a slew of punches. Ilea's body was pushed back with each impact, the giant of stone and metal finally grabbing her entire torso before he threw her down to the ground.

She hit the stone four times before she flipped in the air and slid to a stop, not a bit of blood on her. Granted, the strikes had done some damage, but most of her enemies managed to injure her in one form or another. What they couldn't do was put her down permanently. She doubted that the dwarven Champion would come close.

I'll let him try for a little longer, she thought. *For the fans.*

She eyed the crowd behind the barrier and smiled as Helwart stomped her way, his speed increasing with each heavy step. A glance behind her revealed the proximity of the stands, people already clearing the area within the trajectory of the coming attack.

Smart folks. Probably not the first time this has happened.

Ilea stood and waited, her weight increased and her health topped off once more. Her armor was the only thing lagging behind in recovery, but she hadn't used it in a while anyway.

Wyrm one is next if he manages to fully destroy this one.

The dwarven juggernaut came at her with a mana-charged kick. His reinforced steel-and-stone-covered shin collided with her chest in a direct strike, much of his defenses shattering in the process. His leg rebounded from the impact as if he had kicked a pole of steel planted in the ground.

Ilea was sent flying, her reinforced body crashing into the arena wall, stone shattering around her as the barrier flickered above. She was starting to claw her way out when the dwarf reached her and slammed her back inside with a punch. He didn't stop his attacks until that whole part of the arena had turned to rubble, including some of the stands.

Her head and body shook and twitched as the stone slabs hammered her into the now magically enhanced ground, the force evenly distributed between his arms, her form, and the stone. A ringing started in her ears when he managed to blow out her hearing, and some of her internal organs were injured by the continued abuse. Her left eye burst after a set of strikes against her head.

Helwart started breathing heavily as he grabbed her comparatively small form and threw her back inside the arena. She hit the ground and slammed her hand into the stone, leaving a furrow as she slid to a stop. Her bone armor was replaced by a set of simple leather armor.

This really is annoying without my mantle.

"Done, Mr. Champion?" she asked, blood flowing from her burst eye and her ears. The bruises on her arms remained as well, all quickly healing with her natural regeneration. She started decreasing her weight; neither her regeneration nor her heat generation would be required now. Her sight returned to normal by the time the dwarf had walked only a few steps. He seemed to waver slightly, finally going down to one knee.

"I've fought four-marks less tough than you," he sent back.

Ilea walked toward him as the crowd watched on in silence, hushed murmurs going through the Forged Dome. She stopped a few meters in front of him.

“I’ve killed four-marks less tough than you.”

“A bittersweet compliment, Lilith,” the dwarf said and stood up, both arms raised. *“Now, let’s finish this.”*

“Gladly,” Ilea said, her weight already reduced considerably. She met his attacks with her own punches, stone debris ricocheting off in all directions. She dodged an arm reaching for her, and a kick to his right leg left the metal below exposed.

Four more kicks left the thing unusable. Ilea stepped behind him and sent a dozen strikes into the stone on his back, each punch aimed off to the side in an effort to destroy the stone more than his spine deep below.

There was a moment of heavy silence, the giant machine teetering as if about to rally, then it collapsed.

The crowd didn’t utter a word.

Convenient. Here I was, wondering how to get him out of his shell without space magic.

A quick check with her healing revealed that he was unconscious, half of his organs destroyed but slowly regenerating. *That works*, she thought, stabilizing him as she hopped on top of the downed giant.

The crowd remained silent, watching, until she raised her fist. Then the barrier went down, and a tidal wave of cheers exploded from the stands. She jumped off a moment later when the machine below started moving again.

“Oof… haven’t been pummeled like that for years…” Helwart murmured as the stone around his steel fell away. Much of his war machine looked battered, and both his legs were bent the wrong way.

“Enjoy yourself?” Ilea asked, her arms crossed as she watched him sit up.

He bent forward and tried to put his legs back into place but failed to move the metal. Instead, he replaced his battered machine with a new one. It was smaller and looked considerably more expensive, the same orange hue visible in a few places.

“That I did,” he laughed. “Normally I can only let loose this much with monsters.”

“I get that.” She smiled and looked around at the cheering crowd. “So, I’m the Champion of the Pit now? I wonder what kind of changes I’ll bring to the place.”

“Aye, if you want the responsibility. Gonna be a tough one convincing the blockheads to take on a human leader, though. If you’re even human.”

“I think I’m good. The place seems to be running well enough under your guidance. And yes, I’m human, despite considerable rumors and evidence to the contrary.”

He laughed again. “The artifact is yours. I’ll have it brought over here while you celebrate.”

“I was here for the fights and the key. Not for the attention. Lead the way,” she said.

“Strange that, but sure,” he said, heading toward the stands.

“I’ll meet you outside,” Ilea said. *“I’m off to get the key, I’ll find you later,”* she sent to Verena and Bralin before she teleported into and then past the celebrating crowd.

Ilea waited for Helwart at the top of the pit, gazing at the massive cannons all around.

That was a fun detour. Especially after the last few key locations. And I might’ve secured another ally for our budding empire. She grinned to herself. *I shouldn’t call it that, or I’ll get weird evolution options again next time around. Besides, I don’t even know how an empire works.*

I do wonder, are they gonna make small action figures of me now? The one human to beat their Champion in a full-on brawl? Impressive how much damage he managed to deal for his level. A chunk more sustain and regeneration, and he’ll be beating down four-marks with ease. A healing Class for his third one or something like that would do the trick.

Then again, most of the creatures I’ve killed seemed pretty resistant against physical damage, but maybe he could compensate with that mace of his. The enchanted blades on that thing managed to cut even me.

Helwart flew up a few minutes later with his entourage behind. She got up and joined them, ignoring the others’ remarks and questions.

Each has their own agenda, it seems.

“I won’t get involved with any of this,” she told Helwart telepathically.

“She’s not interested,” Helwart chuckled. “Leave us be, fuck off. Kerron, you stay. I believe you’ve got something in your vault that she wants.”

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SEVENTY-ONE

Ripples in Space

After some considerable whining and complaints, Kerron agreed to lead them to his vault. He would receive compensation for the artifact from the Pit itself, but it remained apparent that he didn't want to part with the key.

"Why do you want it?" he asked when he returned from the vault, Ilea and Helwart waiting in the large entrance hall of his dark blue steel mansion.

"I like collecting shiny things," Ilea said as she received the piece.

[The Iron Key – Ancient Quality]

Seven down and I still haven't been to Iz.

"Taleen, that one," Kerron said. "One of me ancestors passed it down. The only thing she said was to never give it away."

Ilea looked at him and made the artifact vanish. "Well, here we are."

He waved her off. "You beat Helwart, hardly anyone with whom it would be safer. Just hope you know what you're doing."

"Mostly," Ilea reassured him. "And thanks. I appreciate it."

Kerron grunted.

Helwart laughed and turned to leave. "Aye, now I've gotta go make sure there's no civil war in your name. See you around," he added with a wave of his armored hand.

“Let me know if I can help,” Ilea said. “I’ll be off then, too. Thanks, Kerron.”

“I’m open to discu—”

She vanished, not particularly interested in whatever machinations he had in store for her.

Whelp, now pretty much everyone here knows what I look like. Even if they didn’t make the connection between me and the flying fire being, they’d still be interested in me.

“I’ll be down near the Soul Forge,” she sent to Verena through her mark as she found a dark alley between two highly enchanted buildings. She activated her third-tier Transfer and vanished, reappearing a moment later in front of the massive cube.

Aki reacted instantly, taking aim with an arm cannon before he realized it was her. Owl didn’t notice her at all; the Lich was currently floating through some heated luminescent water, her purple eyes glowing.

“The fights have concluded already?” Iana asked when she noticed her.

“Yeah. The Champion challenged me after my fight. And I won the key,” Ilea answered as she spread her wings. It was an incredibly freeing feeling after hiding them away for a few hours. She dissolved her ashen copies and floated down to join Owl. “Let me know if I can help with anything; otherwise, don’t let me bother you. Take as much time as you need.”

She activated her mantle and stored the leather armor. Her ash was much more comfortable than most of her clothes. The water felt nice, but not quite hot enough for her tastes.

“Mind if I heat it up a little more?”

The Lich looked at her, the purple line that passed for her mouth moving into a smile. “Ilea. Welcome back. This sensation is… strange.” She moved her hand through the water. There was some resistance, but not quite as much as a human body produced. “I do not mind heat.”

“Good.”

Ilea started forming lava below her, though she added some ice to make sure the natural pool wouldn’t evaporate completely.

I’ll want to chat with the Meadow about Helwart and the Pit. Hmm. But first, a bath. Then, hopefully, we can move the Soul Forge.

“How does the water feel for you?” she asked, her mantle remaining only as a bathing suit.

Owl cupped her hands together and raised them up, the water flowing through her ethereal form before it fell back to the pool. “Exciting,” she said, sitting down a few meters away.

It took a moment for Ilea to differentiate the frameworks; both Owl’s form and the water itself were flowing into each other to an extent. It was easier to see the difference with her magic perception than with her space awareness.

“There’s still a lot to figure out about your new form.”

The Lich gave her a long look. “Yes. Though I think it’s not that different from my last one. It’s just that where I am is very different.”

“I suppose that’s true. But now you can explore all you want.”

Owl smiled slightly and closed her eyes.

Ilea checked the few messages from the Dome escapade as she leaned back and enjoyed the building heat, the red glow of lava mixing with the luminescent blue water, steam rising from their pool.

‘ding’ Minor Lava Manipulation reaches lvl 2
‘ding’ Monstrous reaches lvl 8
‘ding’ Telepathy reaches lvl 3

Not too much. But I wasn’t exactly in danger, was I?

After the two of them had relaxed in the pool for nearly an hour, Ilea suggested some resistance training.

Bralin and the Elders joined them a few hours later, the dwarf anxious to get away from the Pit for a little while due to the insane winnings from his betting. The fact that he could hide in the Meadow’s domain provided additional joy as none of the assassins sent to get him would manage to get even close. And by the time he returned, the whole thing would’ve long blown over. Or so he hoped.

Ilea received her share of the winnings. Three thousand gold. And a whole stack of ancient documents stating that she was now the owner of various establishments or pieces of land in the Pit.

More things for Claire to go through, and another potential economic partner found in a faraway settlement. And it’s getting easier with all this power.

Once the gates are established, I’ll be able to travel around and expand our network. Adds another layer to my definitely purposeful exploration.

The enchanters finished their preparations after a few more hours, faster than expected thanks to Twin's help. The Fae was more focused on actual support than on making eyes explode.

"Ilea, Owl, we are ready," Iana finally said.

"Chance of everything exploding?" Ilea asked.

"Always. But we went over everything seven times. If it fails, it fails."

"Wonderful," Ilea replied, covering both Iana and Christopher with a layer of her mantle, just in case. *"Maybe get some distance, then. You said I just have to push mana into it?"*

"Yes, with a punch of space magic," Iana replied. *"Owl and Aki will be providing the major part of the mana, and Twin offered to channel it so that we don't have to explain the details to the three of you."*

"Nice of it," Ilea sent, looking at the Fae that had appeared on her left shoulder. *"Thanks for the help."*

Enjoyable. Project.

The being seemed pleased, albeit slightly exhausted.

"Sure you're up for the channeling job? The worst pain I've ever experienced was related to something like that," Ilea said, shuddering when she remembered the deep layer in the Descent. She used her healing on the Fae.

Appreciate, it sent, drooping down a little on Ilea's shoulder as it formed a small bed of ash.

"Take your time," Ilea replied.

The Fae was ready a few minutes later, taking up a position on an extension to the massive magic circle built around the Soul Forge.

The three high-level beings followed the enchanters' instructions and started channeling their mana into the prepared sections on the ground, all flowing past where the Fae floated. Ilea kept her healing active, the Fae grateful for the support as the circle slowly filled with power.

Not even close to what the Meadow made on its own, Ilea observed.

When a particular threshold was reached, the whole thing flared to life, magic spreading through the vicinity as the whole cube was shrouded in wisps. It was, then wasn't. There was a loud sucking noise as air refilled the empty space, the glowing white runes on the ground the only suggestion that a spell had taken place. An empty triangular indentation in the stone marked where the Soul Forge had once been.

Iana cheered and hugged Christopher.

“Let’s hope it appeared where you wanted it,” Bralin said.

“It worked,” Iana said. She and Christopher now walked past the others and started erasing the runes, while Bralin raised the ground to destroy the last bit of evidence.

“If you say so.”

“We’ll find out soon,” Ilea said.

She let them finish their work before she gathered everyone around her, Twin back on her shoulder and nestled in a blanket of ash.

“Buckle up, children,” she said and activated Transfer.

Power gathered before the fabric shifted and the group reappeared in the domain of the Meadow.

Ilea smiled and started clapping her hands at the sight of the Soul Forge perfectly set into the prepared section of stone.

“You do not cease to impress, old friend.”

“With age comes wisdom,” the being replied. *“For most.”*

“For most,” Ilea repeated. “Field trip over, everyone.”

“It was fun,” Iana said.

Bralin just shook his head and laughed.

“How did things go with the key?” the Meadow asked.

Ilea smiled. *“Very well. I won a fight against Helwart Maulstroem, the Champion of the Dome, and kind of its ruler. I got the key as a prize, but I also hinted at a potential alliance or trade agreements. If the other parties are interested in relations with the Pit, that is.”*

“Really? You’re turning into a diplomat?”

“I think I just enjoy connecting people, you know? And need I remind you of who brought you to Elos in the first place?” she asked with a wink.

“Touché. I will let the councils know that there may be an additional settlement to negotiate with. Good work out there.”

Ilea nodded.

Iana and Christopher had already headed back into the ancient facility, the Shades in tow, while Bralin had rejoined Goliath, returning to whatever projects they had started.

“I think I’ll enjoy the hearth for a little while longer,” Verena said, Twin appearing on her shoulder.

“Look who’s got a Faen friend,” Ilea said.

The next Valkyrie? Who knows.

“You’re keeping an eye on all the tech, right?” Ilea asked the Meadow.

“Of course, Ilea. All these gifts you have brought me to take over this realm. You will be my most feared Queen,” it said.

“I don’t think you’d need any of that fancy tech. A few centuries and you’ll have enough of a following to do the work for you.”

“Don’t give me nightmares like that. Speaking of which, I got confirmation that the councils will meet here again in five days. With more people – and plans to sign the first treaties.”

“Here?”

“They both agreed, yes. I seem to be seen as some kind of mediary. Perhaps due to my power and stationary nature.”

She smiled. *“I imagine so, yes. And I like that.”*

“Your presence was wished for too, if you’re available.”

“Of course. How could I miss the forging of such an alliance?” Ilea asked. *“We are talking about an alliance, right? Not just some simple trade agreements?”*

“Likely in name only, to start. Trust between Ravenhall and Hallowfort will require time to build, though both the gates and you have laid a great foundation.”

“No need to flatter me.”

“I’m not. You have saved Elana, have proven your strength to Doravin, and are a friend of Catelyn, having saved her life from a Feynor attack. You have defended Hallowfort against the corruption and have helped tremendously in quelling what remained of it within the Descent.

“Many of the expedition would not be here were it not for you, and the Awakened remember. I will also say that the Council recognizes that it was you who brought me here. And I don’t think I have to explain the Ravenhall side of things.”

“You don’t,” Ilea said. *“I’ll be there.”*

“Good. Besides… most importantly, I think, the values of these two settlements fit quite well together. Freedom and openness to all. A will to explore and to thrive, even in harsh environments. I believe the Shadows and Sentinels of Ravenhall and the divers and scavengers of Hallowfort will find much in common.”

“Agreed.”

Throw in the frontier town of Riverwatch and the exiles from the Pit, and you’ve got some kind of stew going.

She sighed and looked at the massive steel cube, then glanced around the domain of the Meadow. With the enchanters' pyramid-like structure and Goliath's forge, it was slowly turning into an actual settlement.

And soon, the gates will bring more.

I'm excited for that.

"I didn't really plan for any of this, but I'm really glad you came here from Erendar. It feels like we're building something meaningful here."

"It does."

Ilea smiled. *"What time is it?"*

The Meadow pulled on her with space magic, and Ilea deactivated her resistance. She reappeared in the northern lands, the moon above obscured by clouds – non-arcanely charged ones for once. She looked at the cracks in the land, lakes of mist moving through them as if they were rivers.

She breathed out and smiled. *"I sometimes forget just how pretty it is."*

"Quite a sight. And so very full of life," the Meadow answered.

Yeah. And all of this was an unknown frontier to most humans just a few years ago. It still is, really. But not for long now.

The two remained silent for a few minutes. The tree had, of course, remained down in its domain, but its presence could be felt by those who knew what to look for.

After a while, Ilea returned with the help of the Meadow.

"Staying?"

"Until morning, I think," Ilea said.

"Where do you plan to go?"

"Ravenhall. A normal breakfast would be nice for a change. And if the councils are meeting here in five days, I should probably chat to Claire beforehand."

"Indeed."

"Until then, some training?" Ilea asked.

The Meadow obliged, roots and stone forming around her.

"How are things around here, by the way? Since you arrived."

"The Feynor and the armies of the Dark Protector have reduced their activity. Spies employed by the Council have tracked some of their movement, but it seems they deem Hallowfort untouchable for the time being."

"I didn't expect anything less from the highest-level seed brought in from another realm."

The tree sent a sad emotion. *“Is that all I am to you?”*

“Eldritch space tree,” Ilea corrected as her body was slowly ripped apart, her flesh fighting to stay together until she activated Primordial Shift and forced a connection once more.

Ilea flew circles in the massive barrier, dodging stones and spears whilst resisting the ever-growing pressure from the fabric itself.

Did Helwart feel the same way when he fought me? she wondered. The Meadow was giving her every advantage it could, and she still felt incredibly outmatched. *Hmm… probably not. Don’t think he really understood what he was up against*.

Looking at the god-like being all around her with her enhanced Space Manipulation, only her meditation and rational mind kept Ilea from running away at the unfathomable sight. She had thought she was getting more comfortable with what she perceived of her friend, but every time she figured something out, new layers seemed to unravel before her.

Ilea did wonder if the Meadow was just messing with her, but a primal part deep within her knew it was her own mind that sought to protect her sanity. Too much revealed in too little time may prove dangerous, but she would keep her conscious efforts up, and not just for the potential levels in Fear Resistance.

It just felt right to try and see it.

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SEVENTY-TWO

Brunch

Ilea returned home at noon the next day. A cool breeze came in from the balcony door when she opened it with her Space Manipulation.

She smiled and walked out to see signs of exposure on the stone floor. A quick cleanse with her ash returned the platform to its former glory, perhaps even a bit of it sanded off. Or ashed off, in this case.

The skies were clear, letting her see far across the eastern ocean. She rested her elbows on the railings and checked the few messages from her training.

'ding' Minor Earth Manipulation reaches lvl 2
'ding' Minor Ice Manipulation reaches lvl 2
'ding' Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 7
'ding' Fear Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2
'ding' Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 19
'ding' Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4

When was the last time I slept?

The thought struck her when she saw her bed and bookshelves in her room through her dominion. She'd barely been here in months. In a way, the Meadow's domain felt more like home at this point than this place did.

The initial idea for the house was for her to have a quiet retreat near the ocean. It still was that, but with her power and abilities, Ilea could pretty much experience the same calm in the middle of an arcane storm. Granted, the loud impacts would be slightly annoying.

Just been pretty busy. It's been fun too, though. And I'll get some sleep again soon.

Sleeping had always been such a joy that she wouldn't have thought herself capable of sidelining the important hobby for anything. But here she was, training resistances with three- and four-marks instead.

Like I'm some kind of pro kick-boxer. Ah well, I did get to experience those hot spring baths in the last few days, and the tournament was pretty relaxing. Hmm. I could move the library and my things here into the Soul Forge, then I can take breaks in front of a hearth instead of half a continent away.

And I'd be close to a bunch of my friends. That sounds good. While I like the retreat here… it does feel a bit desolate.

She blinked up into her bedroom and spread out her ash, storing every book inside her domain. *Now it looks outright abandoned*, she thought, looking at the sight. *Kind of surprising that nobody ever broke in. Not like it's too far away from Ravenhall. Just a quick flight.*

She tapped her cheek, realizing that not everyone had wings or her flight speed. Let alone the fact that most humans didn't just go into the wilderness. Only adventurers did, and they would likely understand not to fuck with someone who had their house in this location.

Ilea appeared above her home and spread her wings, quickly checking on the cats in the nearby cavern. *Seems like they're all grown up now. Time does move.* She smiled to herself. *Maybe all those hundreds of points of Wisdom are doing something after all.*

She couldn't see all of the tigers either. *Moved out, definitely. Into a nice cave a few miles away.* With that, she moved her ashen wings, shooting her slightly cindered form toward the cliff's edge. It was a little late for breakfast, so she decided to get brunch instead.

* * *

Ilea landed near the restaurant she liked to have breakfast in. The terrace was somewhat busy, not reserved for her alone when she was out of town.

She waited a few seconds until two squads of Shadow Guards had confronted her, two of them quickly confirming that she was, in fact, Lilith.

When they disappeared again, Ilea sat down at one of the small tables on the terrace. She chose a spot in a corner with a view of the mountain range. She used her mark to inform Claire of her whereabouts.

The waitress was new, but Ilea's casual clothes and Monstrous prevented her from seeming like some kind of three-mark monster. A welcome detail, only marred slightly by the patrons who had seen her land and her short interaction with eight Shadow Guards.

The woman's eyes went larger and larger as Ilea's order went on and on, slowly nodding as she wrote everything down on a small notepad. She did a double-take when Ilea was done, looking at her before she looked down at the notepad again.

"Are you… excuse me… are you Lady Lilith?"

"Yes," she answered.

"I thought you'd be… scarier," the woman said with a slightly nervous smile.

"I'm here for brunch. No need to be scary."

"I, ah… understand. Thanks, I'll have your order here as fast as possible."

"I appreciate it."

She sighed and leaned back on the comfortable chair, ignoring the creaking sounds as she subtly reinforced it with some ash.

Looks like they replaced all the chairs. She squinted at nobody in particular. *Must be a coincidence.*

A few minutes later, Claire stepped out from the stairwell and glanced around, her eyes falling on Ilea before she smiled. Her black hair was untied for once, flowing slightly in the wind. She wore a neat black vest and loose black pants with a dozen hidden pockets. A few rings glinted in the sunlight before she vanished and reappeared behind a chair at Ilea's table.

"There you are," she said as she sat down, facing the sun.

"You sound downright elated," Ilea said. "Things are going well, I take it?"

Claire closed her eyes as she leaned back, sighing contentedly before she opened her eyes. "Yes. I finally have a good reason to leave my office for a nice brunch and some sunlight."

"Almost sounds like you're blaming me for your obsession with work."

Claire waved her off. “Just been a while. Important work is important work. I’m delegating more and more, but with the…” She trailed off, looking around. “With the project. You know.”

Ilea established a telepathic connection. *“This is probably safer,”* she said.

“Telepathy? You’ve been busy too, then,” Claire answered. *“Care for an update?”*

“I’m all ears. I did hear about the upcoming meeting at the Meadow’s. I’ll be there, too.”

“That’s good to hear. So… the materials for the teleportation circles are coming together, as are the contracts, the pricing, personnel, and preparations near Ravenhall and in Morhill. I can’t wait to get this thing going. We’ll have to expand Morhill in no time. We predict it will become an even larger hub of adventurers than even Virilya.”

“Why Morhill and not Ravenhall?” Ilea asked.

“As a buffer zone. More neutral ground. Ravenhall is associated with the Shadow’s Hand, and our recent independence could create tensions if we chose it as a teleportation hub. And it’s a matter of safety, too. The more teleportation gates there are in a single location, the more potential points of attack. We’d like to prevent another catastrophe, and in Morhill, we can build a hub from the start.”

“You’re going at this with full force, I see.”

Claire smiled. *“Of course, Ilea. I know you’re fighting four-marks out there, but to city-dwellers like me, these gates are going to change everything.”*

“No. Trust me, I get it. I’m excited too.”

The waitress brought tea and the first plates of food.

“Thank you,” Ilea said and bit into a croissant.

“It’ll be nice to have the gates around,” Ilea sent. Talking with a full mouth wasn’t an issue anymore with telepathy, a benefit she hadn’t really considered.

“The Sentinels, the Shadows, trade, expansion into the wilderness – everything will become ten times faster, and far safer, too,” Claire said. *“But enough about work. How are things with you? A skill change or more?”*

“My third Class evolved,” Ilea said with a smile. *“I’m even harder to kill now.”*

“I have no idea what that means at this point. But I’m happy for you. You did always enjoy resistance training and the like.”

“I did and do. The search for the keys is going well. Oh, and I recently found a potential new city for negotiations. The Pit, a dwarven settlement in the north. I fought their de facto leader yesterday. He seemed very interested in joining a teleportation network. Lots of smithies, the whole town is outright covered in a mist of steel. And they have incredible enchantments and runework. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“Color me intrigued,” Claire said. *“Production is the major point where we can’t compete with the existing kingdoms and the Empire of Lys. A partner for that would be wonderful to have.”*

Ilea moved on to the next plate. *“Sounds like a plan. I have more gold for you, too, and I won a bunch of smithies and things in the Pit as well.”* She moved all the papers and nearly three thousand gold from her domain into her bracelet.

“May I?”

She touched Claire’s hand, allowing her to access the item.

“That’s… substantial. Wonderful,” Claire said with a grin before she summoned one of the contracts. She looked at it for two seconds before it vanished again. *“Old, well-written, marked with several magical seals, and beautiful in design. Whatever this Pit is, I already like it.”*

“You should try to get your hands on their cannon defense system. They’ve got enough power to blast away even four-marks,” Ilea said, her chest tightening a little as she remembered the impact.

Claire raised her eyebrows. *“Seems like you like them. Our defensive measures are getting better every month, but there’s always room for more improvement. Especially knowing what kind of horrors are out there.”*

“You have me,” Ilea said, eating a bite of a sweet jam-filled pastry.

“We can’t build our whole defense system around your existence. You didn’t want to be a goddess, I believe, and I don’t assume that has changed?”

“It hasn’t. And yeah, I’m not stationary like the Meadow. We have some new allies, too, though, and Aki got an upgrade.”

“He did? Again?”

“Yes. A major one this time.”

“I’ll be happy to see him.”

Ilea refilled her cup from the steaming pot.

Claire filled her plate as well.

Ilea relaxed and checked the marks on Kyrian and Trian. Both were somewhere in the mountain range about forty kilometers to the southwest. A training mission, she assumed.

"How are things otherwise? Elven attacks? Taleen incursions? Wars?"

"Calm. Some smaller conflicts in Baralia, but that was to be expected. The Empire is doing good work in preventing them from setting up a coordinated force. The high level of independence most cities enjoy helps, but a large chunk of their labor is gone. And crime has spiked, as expected.

"I hear many of the Sentinels are making a name for themselves there. Gael is already some kind of local hero," Claire added with a smile. *"Relations with Kroll have continued steadily after your involvement with the Corinth Order and your meeting with Emmanuel Eilhart. They have shifted from a cautious position regarding our independence to a growing ally."*

"That's nice. I liked his guards well enough. And he seemed pretty reasonable."

"Yeah. And he obviously respects your power. And ours in turn. Lys is a little more cautious, despite their extensive information network. It's still surprising to me that the Empress hasn't invited you for an audience yet."

"Do I want to meet her?"

"Why not? You've already met one of her generals. And while you're not the Queen of Ravenhall, you are a member of its Council, and so far, you've done a good job representing our position. More importantly, I think you've done a good job simply presenting a display of power."

"Is that what I am now?" Ilea asked with a sigh.

Claire smiled. *"Sorry. Though how many humans can face and kill four-mark monsters? As much as you don't want the responsibility, your sheer existence and association with Ravenhall is a deterrent."*

"Kind of strange to hear, to be honest. But I get it. I wasn't surprised to hear about the diminishing hostile activity of the Feynor due to the presence of the Meadow. I guess after what happened in Riverwatch, I could be something similar here in the south."

"You are. And though I doubt you're the only three-mark human out there, your personal power, coupled with the Shadows and Sentinels, presents quite a bit of strength. Enough to negotiate fairly. In terms of Alyris of Lys and her apparent lack of direct interest in you, I have an

inkling that the Lily is playing a part in that as well. Helena takes you very seriously. As a potential threat, that is. I'm still unsure as to her more personal opinions."

"You think the Empress is part of them?" Ilea asked.

Claire sipped her tea and took another bite of pastry. *"We don't know. I'm sure she tolerates them. Just like the other nations do. What little we know is that the Lily is old, well-connected, and enmeshed. It's not all bad, as you know. Much of the relative stability we've had likely stems in part from them. But things are changing, and with the gates, those changes will become even quicker."*

Ilea remained quiet for a while.

"Things have changed a lot, haven't they? With us. With the team."

"Yeah. And I'm proud of it all. Your work, our work, the Meadow, Iana and Christopher, Trian and Kyrian, the Sentinels, Hallowfort, and the gates to bring it all together. A lot of people will benefit from this. Settlements that need support, help against monster or elven attacks, people who need a healer, or simply adventurers or Shadows wishing to explore the frontiers."

Ilea noted that most of the people around them had left by now, while no new patrons had joined them on the terrace. A waiter stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"You've been out there, too?" Ilea asked. Claire had leveled twice since she had last seen her.

"I have. With Trian and Kyrian. I tend to find solutions to problems I've been stuck on for days after I come back from a bit of fighting. And it helps keep me grounded."

"A bit of balance goes a long way."

"It certainly does."

They ate in silence for a while.

"So, any plans before the meeting?" Claire asked.

Ilea leaned back in her chair. *"Not really. Feels like I've been pretty busy recently. I think I'll take a few days off, check in on people, maybe claim a room in the Soul Forge. Would you be up for some dancing later?"*

"Soul Forge? And dancing… Sure, but it's a bit early now, and I'll have to digest this brunch," Claire said. *"At sundown?"*

"That sounds wonderful, yes. Oh, and you'll see the Soul Forge when you're back north. Let's keep it as a small surprise. It's nothing crazy."

Claire smiled. *"I'll wait and see it for myself, then."*

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SEVENTY-THREE

Impressions

Ilea went back north after her talk with Claire, this time using the teleportation gate connecting the hidden facility of Ravenhall to the domain of the Meadow. The guards were all Shadows, and they knew who she was.

She found Aki training with Owl, the two circling each other in fast-moving patterns. He was managing to keep up, mainly thanks to his higher accuracy. Their spells sent explosive waves through the vicinity, an opaque barrier set up by the Meadow shimmering around them.

Getting used to their bodies and power. That's good to see.

And yeah, the idea of getting a room here sounds more and more appealing.

She quickly went into the Soul Forge and checked the cozy room on one of the highest floors. The one she had made herself at home in before.

"Is this one taken already?"

"Taken?" the Meadow asked. *"You just brought the whole Soul Forge back. As far as I'm concerned, it's yours to do with what you like."*

"Well. The plan was for it to be a Sentinel outpost. But I suppose as one of its founders, I can claim one or two of its rooms, right?"

"As I said, you just brought it back, so claim away. Should I help with the furnishing?"

"Then I claim this one. And that would be lovely. I'll need bookshelves."

"Wood or stone?"

“Wood is more in keeping with the room.”

Ilea piled up the books stored in her domain, then checked the adjacent rooms and found a small one right next to hers. One of the walls was at a steep angle, and the whole room was rather small, apparently used as a storage unit. It was large enough to fit her bed, however, and maybe another fireplace. Everything else she could keep in her other room.

“This one will be my bedroom.”

“Should I connect them and add a door?” the Meadow asked.

“That would be lovely, dear. Also, it’s funny to me that you, of all beings, would help me with a renovation project.”

“I like those a lot more than battles.”

“Right. Sorry about all the conflict that we mortals constantly get into.”

A breeze of space magic flowed past her.

“I’ve registered your apartment. All letters and complaints will henceforth be redirected to this address,” the Meadow said. *“May I look through your collection of books? I’m always looking for new material.”*

“Registered? I mean, sure. And yes, they’re a pretty random collection. I haven’t taken the time to read a whole lot of it,” Ilea replied, teleporting everything in the room into another storage unit. *“Space magic makes moving so easy. Can’t imagine carrying all my stuff from near Ravenhall up here without teleportation or storage items.”*

“The shelves are finished, and I’ve sorted the books by genre and author. Let me know what you think of the design.”

The shelves were light brown wood, the outer edges matching the Soul Forge’s brutalist style, yet the Meadow had added swirls and angles, giving a warm, playful touch so as not to detract from the cozy atmosphere Ilea wanted.

“Very pretty, thank you. We’ll turn this research cube into a comfortable northern headquarters in no time,” Ilea said.

“I’m sure that Trian and Iana will want offices, research, and storage rooms, too.”

“No reason they can’t be comfortable, though,” Ilea said. *“Oh, can you add a new hearth as well? One that can sustain a little more heat?”*

“Yes, Lady Lilith. Coming right up.”

“You really do like this more than fighting me.”

The Meadow didn’t reply, instead forming several stone hearths in the room. *“Let me show you the designs I’m thinking of.”*

Ilea smiled.

* * *

The days leading up to the council meeting passed without any major disturbances. Iana and her crew studied the Soul Forge and its secrets. Bralin received a home from the Meadow and learned what he could from Goliath. The rest of the more or less permanent residents spent their time fighting each other or experimenting with their magic.

Ilea mostly trained with the Meadow, but she found the tree wasn't quite as invested in their bouts as usual. She assumed it had to do with the curious Faen visitor in the form of Twin, whose presence was mostly made known by the occasional outburst of kingly attitude.

Ilea made sure to get brunch every day. She spent some time helping the Sentinels with their pain tolerance in between training sessions and had a few bouts with most of the faculty. With and without her armaments.

On the fifth day, Ilea sat atop a northern mountain and looked to the east. She was eating one of Keyla's meals and enjoying the freezing breeze flowing through her hair. Lightning slashed into the landscape in the distance, a constant to the north she now found comfort in. Up here, very few creatures would bother her, and those that did were likely quite interesting beings. Beings she could fight.

She finished the plate and checked her messages from the past few days.

'ding' Archon Strike [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 11
'ding' Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 8
'ding' Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9

'ding' Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7
'ding' Arcane Dominion [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9
'ding' Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 10
'ding' Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
'ding' Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
'ding' Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7

‘ding’ Mantle of the Titan [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
‘ding’ Mantle of the Titan [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
‘ding’ Titan Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
‘ding’ Embered Heart [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
‘ding’ Embered Heart [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
‘ding’ Tempered Seal [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2
‘ding’ Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7
‘ding’ Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 8
‘ding’ Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9
‘ding’ Embered Form [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Fires of Creation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3
‘ding’ Fires of Creation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4
‘ding’ Space Manipulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2
‘ding’ Space Manipulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3

‘ding’ Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 18
‘ding’ Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 13
‘ding’ Dancing reaches lvl 7
‘ding’ Gourmet reaches lvl 8
‘ding’ Minor Earth Manipulation reaches lvl 3
‘ding’ Minor Ice Manipulation reaches lvl 3
‘ding’ Minor Lava Manipulation reaches lvl 3
‘ding’ Minor Lava Manipulation reaches lvl 4
‘ding’ Monstrous reaches lvl 9
‘ding’ Monstrous reaches lvl 10
‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches 2nd lvl 11
‘ding’ Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 14
…
‘ding’ Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 17
‘ding’ Soul Perception reaches lvl 13
‘ding’ Spear of Ash reaches lvl 20
‘ding’ Teaching reaches lvl 10
‘ding’ Telepathy reaches lvl 4
‘ding’ Telepathy reaches lvl 5
‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 22
‘ding’ Ash Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5
‘ding’ Ash Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 8
‘ding’ Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 11
‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 8
‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9
‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20
‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 10
‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 11
‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 12
‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 17
‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5

Ilea decided to use her available third-tier General Skill point to enhance the one resistance where her mantle and resilience didn’t make that much of a difference.

General Skills available for third-tier advancement:
…
Soul Magic Resistance
You have fought and killed a high-level Lich Fragment and chosen to expose your soul to the harsh training of a Greater Lich. Are you sure you don’t want to become an undead yourself? Or perhaps you’re just incredibly scared of them. Skulls and stuff. Dark hoods? No?

‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1
Soul Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1
The fleeting conscience of man and beast. Flesh, energy, motion, and thought. The soul stands separate entirely, yet intertwined all the same. Through hardship you have learned understanding, not through meditation and study. A brutal yet comforting truth, strengthening that which cannot be grasped.
2nd stage: Battered and cracked. Challenged and near broken. Your soul has endured through sheer tenacity against that which sought to bring about its end. A serene calm now permeates your very essence, changed and evolved, grounded and calm.
3rd stage: You have survived concentrated efforts to destroy your essence. Have fought and killed those that would have harmed your very core. Steady and entirely settled it remains. And so it shall remain. Your soul

cannot be destroyed, nor can it be separated from your body. Injuries sustained will retain their effects.

Another step toward immortality, she thought with a grin. *That's better than I expected. Though I guess it will still hurt like hell when I take heavy soul magic damage.*

She felt the pull of space magic, letting go as she was realigned within the fabric. The Meadow's domain came into view just as the teleportation gate activated.

* * *

Navalis followed the Council and additional Shadows out of Ravenhall, focused on her job as protection detail. Rock tried to get her attention, but she ignored him. They had a job to do, and chit-chat wasn't part of it. She could downright feel his excitement. Navalis felt tense, if anything. How could she not?

Three days prior, their former team leader, Sulivhaan, now council member of the independent Ravenhall, had asked them for this favor. To accompany him to a meeting between councils. Not somewhere in the Plains, but in the far north. Of course, she'd had plenty of questions, but she knew that things would be revealed in due time.

Senia wasn't happy about her interrupted sleep, but when they had reached the meeting spot in the Head Administrator's office, that annoyance quickly vanished. Not only was the entire Council present, but there was also a man Navalis could simply not gauge.

He was stronger than anyone she had ever met, yet so unassuming. He wore simple leather armor, his gray eyes avoiding eye contact whenever she tried to force it. She could feel the curse magic flowing through him, more powerful than anything she had seen in a human.

Everyone besides the man had donned their battle regalia, tension in the air as the Head Administrator informed them of the meeting that would take place in the next hour. They were then shrouded in shadow and sound magic and instructed to hold on to flying metal bars, all controlled by the mysterious man, whom Navalis always tried to keep in front of her.

They landed half an hour later, deep within the valleys of the southern mountains. A location that looked just like everything else in the area.

Unremarkable. She spotted the hidden entrance in the ground below the snow, but she might've missed it if she had simply been passing by.

Claire, as the Head Administrator had introduced herself, opened a hatch, leading them down into a cellar of sorts. Everyone else followed. The mysterious man entered last, closing the hatch behind him.

Shadows were standing guard in the underground hall, and the various chests and containers suggested some kind of hidden storage facility. Claire activated a set of runes, the ground shifting to reveal yet another entrance, enchanted against all intrusion spells and perception abilities Navalis had at her disposal.

An expensive endeavor. One I would've missed in almost all scenarios.

She glanced around at the group and found that some people seemed to be in the know. Most of the Council at the very least.

"The way down is to jump," Claire said, and she did as much, vanishing into the thin shaft. She landed a few seconds later and shouted for the next person to go. Navalis and the curse mage were the last two remaining upstairs when she glanced at him and jumped.

She landed without a sound, stepping out of the way as she took in the surroundings. Magical lights shone from the walls, revealing a circular room with a stone platform at the center. The stone was lined with metal, hundreds of runes visible on the surface. It all shone with magical energy.

Glances and a few murmurs were exchanged.

"Is that what I think it is?" Rock asked in a whisper.

Nobody replied. He had the tact not to say more.

A teleportation gate… in Ravenhall? What else could it be? But who would've built it? Who could it belong to? How long have they kept this hidden for? How did anyone even figure this out? Why now?

"Welcome, Shadows and Councilmembers of Ravenhall, to the first set of our very own teleportation gates," Claire said. "I apologize for the secrecy, but I assume you all understand the weight of this milestone. We will now go to the north to meet the Council of Hallowfort within the domain of the Meadow, an ally, and a being of great power. Please be advised not to engage *anything* you see in combat. And be prepared for a lot of ambient mana exposure."

Claire stepped onto the platform. "Please join me."

Everyone did as asked, with the appropriate hesitation. And awe.

Teleportation gates. And a few places I've never heard of…

Navalis glanced at Sulivhaan, but he looked reasonably calm.

The curse mage was the last to step onto the platform. When he did, Claire activated a set of enchantments on the platform, and the thing came to life.

A spell activated a moment later, everything in her perception spinning for a split second before her feet touched solid ground one more. A bizarre experience, but not something Navalis could consider for more than a heartbeat.

Her enhanced perception skills allowed her to see magic hidden to most others, allowed her to feel what others could not. But wherever she might have expected to appear, she hadn't been prepared for this. She had her bow in hand before she could think, her perception abilities disabled the moment she felt the powerful auras all around.

The impressions were so overwhelming that her very mind seemed to blur, even with all her abilities active. So she disabled them, the action leaving her open to possible attacks, but she had to trust her instincts.

There had been an aura of death powerful enough to suggest a being far into the four marks and two beings of void and arcane magic close to that level. That much she could've handled, but when that was combined with the all-consuming aura coming from a field of black grass farther into the cavern, she'd had no choice.

"Lilith, it might be best for you to deal with the introductions."

Claire's voice brought Navalis back, and her eyes fell on the approaching woman, a familiar face, clad in well-fitting black pants and a white blouse that looked new. Her piercing blue eyes took in the arrivals, her gaze the same but entirely different from what Navalis remembered.

It was Ilea, no doubt, or something that looked like Ilea. She didn't dare activate her perception skills again, but even without them, she could feel the hairs on her neck stand up. Something about her didn't seem right, didn't seem human.

"Welcome, everyone, to the far north, the domain of the Endless Meadow, our newly established northern outpost for the Medic Sentinels, and the town of Hallowfort, whose Council of Awakened will join us shortly. You should all be familiar with the Elders of the Shadow's Hand."

As Elders Lucas, Verena, and Pierce joined them, some of the people present exchanged glances. Navalis was simply curious how she could have missed the three humans.

“As for the others, we should probably do this one at a time,” Ilea said. “This is the Guardian of our Medic Sentinels, Aki.”

Navalis charged an arrow with power, aiming up at the slender silver form, familiar green eyes taking her in as it moved through the air, coming to a stop behind and slightly above Ilea.

“Greetings,” it said in a slightly distorted voice.

[Pursuer of Akelion – lvl ???]

What is going on?!

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SEVENTY-FOUR

Introductions

Trian looked around the underground domain. The cube-like structure set into the stone ground looked interesting, especially compared to the few stone buildings that were present. He had known about the teleportation gates beforehand, but he couldn't deny that he hadn't quite grasped the reality of it until he'd stepped onto the platform and appeared here, supposedly in the north.

Aki's new form wasn't a surprise. It had only been a matter of time until Ilea found his colleague an upgrade to his previous form. *Necessary, too. The students were getting off too easily.* He allowed himself a slight smile, looking at the large but slender form walking through the very air.

Enormous power radiated from its form, an almost invisible shield protecting the machine. Trian couldn't help but feel pride, knowing that Aki was a Sentinel through and through. He gave the machine a slight nod and received one in return.

The floating form in the distance talking to a dwarf didn't stand out in the grand scheme of things. The smith Ilea had mentioned, he assumed. They had been informed about the various beings who lived here in Hallowfort, though the town itself was located up above.

He looked around at the black grass, a crystal tree visible a few hundred meters away. Pillars of stone rose throughout the vicinity, fireflies moving in serene patterns over the downright eerie meadow. Beyond, the cavern opened up, and what he knew to be crystal light was coming in from

outside. The edge of a cliff suggested a drop, though how far it was he didn't know.

They had told him plenty about the Meadow. He was glad to finally see and meet it himself.

Kyrian glanced at him and gave him a slight nod.

Trian straightened and bowed respectfully, ignoring the looks he was surely getting from both the present representatives, the Elders, and his friends.

"Greetings, Endless Meadow," he said in a clear voice. He waited a few seconds, almost starting to feel a little silly, when he felt a magical presence connect to his mind.

"Greetings, young human. You are receptive. Do scream, should this cause you any distress," a voice said into his mind.

"It doesn't seem to be an issue. And we have an arcane healer present. I've heard a lot about you," he said, used to telepathy as a result of Ilea.

Time to meet another friend of hers, he thought, squashing the feeling of being in the presence of a god.

* * *

Navalis glanced at the Headmaster, who had greeted what she assumed to be the overwhelming presence ahead of them. She gulped as she watched him move toward it, the others too preoccupied with the Taleen death machine to react.

Is he communicating through telepathy?

It irked her. She wanted to see, wanted to learn everything she could about this place and its denizens, but she knew it was beyond her. Navalis ground her teeth when she noticed Ilea looking right at her, and a moment later, the woman's voice resounded in her mind.

"No need to freak out. Were you not informed?"

Telepathy. She's a mind mage, too, now? She had thought her arcane presence was her main form of magic, and with all the stories of ash, she assumed that to be her second. *A General Skill? Or another Class, if such a thing is even possible?*

"You can reply, you know," Ilea said. *"Come on, we fought elves together. I'm still the same, just way, way more powerful."*

“You don’t feel the same,” Navalis said, immediately regretting her words. It was so easy to slip with telepathy.

“I’m above level five hundred. Don’t tell the others. Plenty of evolutions and a third Class. I’ll have to show you some of my magic later. The space stuff is super cool.”

The woman smiled, winking at her.

She’s the same. No monster would be so nonchalant. Five hundred?

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

Is she hiding it, then? Her magical presence feels closer to that of the Pursuer, maybe even beyond.

She gulped. *“Sorry, it’s just a lot to take in. I didn’t know what we were going to do. Sulivhaan only spoke of a meeting.”*

“Well, it’s kind of difficult to describe all this believably.”

Navalis nodded slowly. The stories of Lilith were true. Navalis had assumed they weren’t exactly exaggerated, more the opposite. Her acquaintance from a few years past had risen in power to the point where she could no longer comprehend it. She had seen the types of injuries she’d healed when she’d been at two hundred; she couldn’t even imagine what a Battle Healer at her level could survive.

The Elders didn’t react much to the introduction of the Pursuer, but Lucas seemed curious about the visitors and the surrounding people. *He’s not in the know, not like the other Elders. I thought he died years ago.*

Navalis bowed respectfully toward the three people. Verena Quil nodded in response. Pierce seemed excited, watching the various people, but mainly Sulivhaan.

“Aki will return to the Headquarters soon, but we’ll have to figure out how to hide him in the city to avoid a panic,” Ilea continued. “He’s a three-mark, after all.”

So are you, Navalis thought.

“This cube thing is going to be the northern site of the Sentinels. The faculty has already been informed. Over there is Goliath, an excellent smith from Hallowfort. Bralin is the dwarf next to him. He’s from the Pit, another settlement closer to the Naraza mountain chain. Don’t be alarmed by the various beings here. All should be Awakened, meaning they’re capable of

thought and communication." She paused. "Right, let's get this out of the way, then. Owl?"

Navalis froze when she felt the presence of death intensify, the feeling of power overwhelming despite her lack of perception abilities. All she could do was fight against her instincts. A four-mark wielder of magic. They had specific procedures in place whenever they encountered such a being. Standing in one place was not one of them. She saw Rock raise his hammer and immediately touched his back to try and dissuade him.

Senia gave them a glance before she looked at Sulivhaan, but the man simply stared forward.

The presence appeared next to Ilea, floating a meter above the ground. It was humanoid in shape but entirely different in every other way. Its body had an ethereal quality, a purple sheen to its form, with two glowing eyes and a line that suggested a mouth. Navalis held her breath, her hands shaking slightly as she resisted the urge to teleport away. She saw the signal Senia gave her, the woman as tense as she was.

Teleportation restricted.

[Greater Lich – lvl ????]

Navalis could feel the fear now. Everyone present was a veteran, and yet they were all tense.

"Uhm… hello everyone," an ethereal voice said as the Lich raised a hand in an awkward, wave-like gesture.

What?

Navalis watched the being glance at Ilea, who gave the Litch a reassuring smile and a nod.

Who… what…

"Hello, Owl," Claire said. "It's nice to meet you."

The Lich seemed relieved by that, the tension broken in an instant.

Rock started laughing, Senia giving him an annoyed glare.

"How is this possible?" Dagon murmured, taking a step forward.

"We met in a dungeon far to the north, some rituals happened millennia ago, I killed a monster and a problematic undead, and now here we are," Ilea said and smiled.

That doesn't explain anything!

Dagon nodded to himself, turning around as he glanced at some of the Shadows. “This is real, right? You’re seeing this, too?”

All Navalis could do was give him a hand signal by way of confirmation, one only her team would understand, but she didn’t really consider it in the moment.

“Yeah, it’s real alright. Or some high-level illusion spell… mind magic, maybe,” Rock said as he looked around with his hammer in one hand.

That thing won’t help you here, Navalis thought.

“There are no illusions here,” Sulivhaan said in a calm voice. “Greetings, Greater Lich Owl,” he added and bowed. “It is good to make your acquaintance.”

“Yes. It’s good to meet you all,” the Lich said and looked at Ilea, her eyes glowing a little brighter.

Aki stepped over and touched her ethereal back with his silver arm, its long fingers currently ending in spikes.

Navalis shivered at the sight.

“Owl is currently a guest,” Ilea explained. “The Meadow is teaching her to handle her overwhelming power so that she doesn’t kill anyone with her presence alone.”

The Meadow… is teaching a four-mark?

Navalis didn’t dare look toward the grass.

* * *

Its eyes moved west for but a moment, always on the lookout for their enemies. Should they choose the path of violence, the Meadow would respond in kind. Hallowfort would stand against those who would seek its destruction.

The edges of the domain were clear. The usual travelers were moving through the hidden crevices that honeycombed the land, lightning distorting the perception of the all-seeing Meadow where it struck the ravaged stone. The day had come like any other, and yet it felt significant. More so than most others.

Life was brought into the world and taken away. New beings would awaken, others would forever be gone, their chance at enlightenment snuffed out by the cruel hand of reality. Civilization, as Elos knew it, would

soon reach another stage with long-range teleportation capable of bringing together species and peoples of distant lands.

Their values and history would clash and grate, the comfort of their walls breached by the ways of the fabric. The fate of thousands lay on the scales of time, and the Meadow saw those at the very center of it all.

It felt pride. To have come here, to be part of it all, to have helped Ilea and many others reach further understanding. This world held promise, its beings full of hope and potential. It considered the wasteland of Erendar, the spirits of death and the sky, roaming long-forgotten lands, civilizations of hardened warriors unable to survive the harsh existence of their realm. And yet their descendants remained, here in these new lands. Saved from extinction by Lilith herself.

And she had brought these people together, against all odds. Her immunity to risk assessment and her inability to avoid danger most certainly correlated with her fast growth in magical power. Her ability to heal the mind was likely the only thing that had kept her sane, the foundation of her grounded state. She was human and yet so much more. Even the Meadow couldn’t grasp the potential future of its friend.

Time moved, ever onward, life vibrant in all of its perception. It was a good day, under the northern suns.

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SEVENTY-FIVE

The Two Councils

Dagon watched as the group split up. Kyrian and Claire joined Trian, while the rest of the Council joined the Elders and Ilea. Tables with snacks and drinks had appeared at some point, the ground flattened and shifted to create a yard in front of the Soul Forge. Wooden ornaments sprouted from the ground to decorate the vicinity, topped with stone bowls filled with white burning ash.

He clasped Elise's hand as they watched the ground shift, elements created before their very eyes. Of course, he was familiar with both storage devices and wood magic, but the spectacle felt so very nonchalant. A demonstration of power, even after everything they had seen and perceived.

He had talked to the Meadow before, but it had been a little while. To be here and to see its magic felt humbling once again.

"It's as magnificent as you described," Elise whispered to him, her eyes fixed on the black grass.

"Yes," Dagon said.

The talks with the Council of Hallowfort had been fruitful. And the first agreements were ready to be signed. And it was just a taste, he knew that much. It felt like all parties were eager to start. And with the gates, he knew that this was only the beginning.

He had to be honest, however. Whatever political and trade advantages this would bring to Ravenhall was secondary to him. The fact that they had traveled to the north had given them the opportunity to communicate with

beings that had never even been to the Plains. They could learn from them, learn about their history, their struggles. It was fundamental, as if the world was opening up.

* * *

Catelyn and the Council of Hallowfort appeared within the domain of the Meadow. She took a deep breath and focused, taking in the group of humans already gathered in front of the Soul Forge, the newest addition to the growing cavern.

Catelyn walked at the front of the group. Hallowfort's councilmembers were equal, but she understood that most humans would infer a sense of less importance from her small size. It was just how they thought; their perception was more focused on the visual than the magical. Nor did she think her larger form would cause anything but tension. They were here because of Ilea and the Meadow.

It had been ages since the entire Council had agreed on anything without complaints. Haiden had known Ilea for quite some time. If the teleportation gates came to be, he'd get both new customers and resources.

Doravin and No respected both the Meadow and Ilea for their strength; no convincing would be necessary for most everything the two suggested. Catelyn was glad they mostly stayed out of Hallowfort's affairs. Good intentions without the necessary historical and cultural knowledge could lead to tensions in the town.

Varahan, unsurprisingly, loved the idea of teleportation gates, her four wings fluttering excitedly today. Catelyn just hoped she would adhere to the rules they had in place, as well as the ones they would sign today.

The most skeptical of the bunch was Elana. Despite the other councilmembers' early concerns about her being favorably disposed toward humans, she was the one who distrusted them the most. That didn't come as a surprise to Catelyn, knowing that Elana had once been a ruler of humans.

Catelyn's early concerns about the Meadow had turned out to be unfounded; the ancient being of space and life was more than helpful, learning about them in the background and assisting where it could. She still sometimes worried about the sheer influence it would have in the coming centuries, but she had found no reason not to risk it. The potential benefits were simply too great.

Peace like never before, and now an opportunity to go to the southern lands, to see and live in places unharmed by arcane storms, cities built in the safety of low mana density, untouched by the constant threat of Miststalkers, on the surface and below the suns. They welcomed the opportunities. It would be somber to see them go. Warriors, smiths, brothers, and sisters. Survivors. Beings she had known for years, some for centuries.

She sighed, reminding herself that with the gates, she could always visit. And their town would flourish with new faces, young and old, adventurers looking to explore the lands of the north. She was especially excited to see the Sentinels. If they were anything like Ilea, the entire region could be affected. So many ruins, treasures, forgotten crypts, waiting to be uncovered.

Catelyn glanced at Elana. She knew the former Queen of Rhyvor had plans, not just for Hallowfort but for all the lands she had once called her own. *Perhaps she will manage to revitalize a part of them after all.*

She saw the black grass in the distance, the crystal tree reflecting the light from the expansive cavern beyond. It was the same light she saw from her room in the Hunter's Den, though she felt little like a hunter in the presence of the Meadow.

A lot would change with this alliance. A lot had already changed. She just hoped that her trust wasn't misplaced.

"*Greetings, ancient one, bearer of the fabric,*" she said through the connection she had already established with the Meadow. She bowed her head slightly, the beings around her doing the same. They were equals here, though none of them was under any illusions as to the true power difference that the Endless Meadow represented.

"*Welcome, Catelyn, bringer of flames. The Council of Ravenhall and its associates are present.*"

"*Thank you.*" Catelyn looked around at her own Council. "Let us mingle, then."

* * *

Ilea watched as a circular wooden table grew from the stone ground, with detailed imagery at its edges depicting bits of history the Meadow had been informed of or been a part of in both Ravenhall's and Hallowfort's past. She

particularly liked the small depiction of herself carrying the tree away from the Daughters of Sephilon. It was easy to miss.

Chairs appeared next to the massive table, and each member of the respective councils, including the guests, took a seat as they moved from casual conversations to a more formal setting. Ilea took a seat as well, already eyeing the food that appeared. Delicacies from both Ravenhall and Hallowfort.

A glance to the side showed Navalis looking around with a bit of an uncertain air about her. The same was true for Owl, she noted. The body language of the experienced Shadow and the ancient Greater Lich was amusingly similar.

"Sit next to me," she sent to Navalis, then repeated the same to Owl.

The Lich and Ranger sat down, giving each other a quick glance before they focused back on the various beings at the table.

"A proper feast," she sent to the Meadow when Twin appeared on her left shoulder.

"I know you wouldn't have enjoyed an event without one," the Meadow replied.

She smiled. *"It is a historic event, right? Can't have that without food."*

"For once, I agree."

Looking at the Fae on her left shoulder gave Ilea pause, and she sent a message to Violence.

"Important meeting. Join? Violence maybe later."

She glanced at Rock and Senia, the two Shadows sitting beside Sulivhaan. They'd be up for a bout or three after all this, she was sure of it.

It was quiet for a moment, a cool breeze flowing in from the caverns.

Catelyn and Claire glanced at each other, then looked at Ilea.

"What?" she sent, first to one, then to the other.

"It's a banquet. I think it's fitting if you open it," Claire replied.

"What she said," Catelyn added.

"You can't even hear each other," Ilea replied, then sighed, smiled, and stood up. At that moment, Violence appeared on her right shoulder; the two Fae glanced at each other, then looked out at the various beings present.

"Good to see you, friend," she sent to the being.

Telepathy? it replied, nodding sagely.

Ilea smiled, then addressed the gathered people.

“I’m not one for speeches,” she said. “But I have to say, it’s really good to see all of you. Here and together. Let’s share some food, and then sign some papers.”

Trian smiled and raised his glass, as did everyone else. A few of the Awakened cheered, as did Rock and Senia.

They ate three courses and dessert. Ilea would’ve liked more, but she could continue afterward. When the last of the gathered councilmembers and associates had finished their plates, Claire stood up.

“Greetings to all of you, again. I’m Claire Russel, Head Administrator of Ravenhall, Shadow, and a member of the Council of Ravenhall. I’m excited to stand here today, here in the north, here below Hallowfort, in the domain of the Meadow.”

She paused and looked at each person in turn.

“Since our last visit, we have set up a variety of agreements. Agreements that will bring to life an alliance between two settlements far apart in the world, between Awakened and humans, an alliance that is, perhaps, the first of its kind.

“The Taleen set the path, forming a kingdom that spanned the underground of Elos, teleportation gates connecting their cities, their settlements, their outposts. All that is left of their glory are their ruins and Guardians that protect them, Guardians that scour the forests on their ancient hunt for Elves. Where many have failed, the enchanters that are here today, Iana of Indur, Christopher of Virilya, and the Endless Meadow of Erendar, have succeeded.

“You have all seen the gates. You have all used them and traveled through the fabric. Their introduction, both here and in the south, will impact trade, warfare, healing, security, and expansion in a fundamental way.

“Ravenhall gained its independence from the Empire of Lys. We are the Shadow’s Hand, the Shadowguard, the Medic Sentinels, and the Council of Ravenhall. We harbor a population of survivors, of refugees, of pioneers, and adventurers. As we are in the south, Hallowfort, with its Guardians, its divers, Awakened, survivors, and pioneers of their own, will be our counterpart in the north.”

She looked at them all, some of the Awakened cheering, the Shadows raising their chins with pride.

“Ravenhall has now secured the town of Morhill, whose population was slaughtered in the demon summonings of Adam Strand. Now it shall be reborn, made into a hub of teleportation gates to serve travelers, traders, explorers, and hunters alike. The first layer of the Descent shall become its counterpart in the north under the watchful eye of its guardians and the Endless Meadow.

“We have secured the metals and materials needed for the production of the gates, each matching pair connected. It will take weeks, months, or even years to set up deals and contracts with any nation, city-state, or settlement interested in joining this network. But in time, we shall bring this world closer together, in trade, in culture, in fighting back against the unforgiving wastelands and monster-infested wilderness.

“To negotiate with nations and rulers like the Dark Protector and the Empire of Lys, we must join limbs and engage from a position of power. Ilea has forged the path, finding her way through the northern wastelands all the way to Tremor and to Hallowfort. She has brought back the Endless Meadow from its home in Erendar. And she has used her own space magic might to transport enchanters, resources, and people, until now today that we are here.”

Claire looked at Ilea for a few seconds, then nodded slightly.

“Teleportation between our settlements and those who would join our alliance will be free, handled by the local guardians and guards. All citizens will be subject to the local law. It will take time for such a transition phase, and more contracts will be forged.

“The citizens of both Ravenhall and Hallowfort will be informed and instructed in the coming months. When we are ready. We will negotiate with the rulers of the human Plains and with the settlements and rulers of the north. I sincerely hope that this alliance of trade and strength will evolve into one of deeper bonds, mutual defense, and, most of all, trust. We are explorers, we are Shadows, we are divers, and now, we stand together.”

Ilea smiled and clapped, and the others did the same, amid cheers and whoops.

Claire sat down again and nodded toward Catelyn.

The fox appeared on the table and sat. “Thank you, Claire of the Far South.” She looked around, a pulse of heat emanating from her, eyes glowing for a short moment before she grinned with sharp, vulpine teeth.

“I am Catelyn, Councilmember of Hallowfort. We have survived here, carved out our home here. We have fought beasts and corruption in the hostile lands of the so-called north. And we shall welcome all those who seek challenge and adventure. The Meadow now shelters us, and the gates shall help us travel to cities and frontiers yet unknown to our peoples. I am excited for the future.”

A stack of papers appeared in front of every member of the two councils. Ilea picked up the first page and started reading, but she got stuck on the first few words.

“There was discussion on the name,” the Meadow supplied. “*Everyone agreed, though if you wish to have it changed, the alternative would be my name instead.”*

Ilea looked at the title of the legal document.

‘The Lilith Accords’

They named it after me…

The title was followed by definitions of the parties involved, the settlements, and then the specific agreements on trade, teleportation, support in the event of monster attacks, and negotiations with other parties, as well as definitions of the purpose of this alliance, its ethics, and its goals.

“You would name it after me?” Ilea asked, looking at Catelyn. “Was that your idea?”

“It was our idea,” Claire said. “Mine and Catelyn’s. And Dagon’s, and Sulivhaan’s, and the Meadow’s. Without you, none of this would have happened. Without you, even if the gates had come to be, there would be no Meadow here. Without you, we would not know of Hallowfort, and Hallowfort would not know of us.”

Ilea still felt confused.

Dagon stood up. “Every historical contract like this one should have a name, and the name of Lilith is both most fitting and sends a clear message to the world. You are known, you have made yourself known, feared, and respected. You were the messenger who reached Virilya, who asked the Hand to join together and retake Ravenhall. And we have retaken, rebuilt, and now we stand here in the north, united, stronger than we’ve ever been before.”

He bowed his head slightly and then sat down.

Ilea listened and breathed in deep. *It’s true, right? Without me, these people would never have met. The Meadow wouldn’t be here either.*

Elana stood up next. She looked at Ilea and sighed, then smiled ever so slightly. “Your name adds weight, Ilea. And power. A first taste, perhaps, before our future allies and enemies meet the Guardians of Hallowfort, the Medic Sentinels, and the Meadow itself.”

Ilea smiled, finding that it felt… right. All of those connections and relationships had led them here. And the name she had used on a whim back in the Iztacalum dungeon was now known throughout the Plains. And beyond.

“The alternative is the Meadow Accords,” the tree said. *“I shall accept the honor, should you not, but I’m not from these lands, nor have I traveled its cities and settlements. I have yet to earn the trust of its citizens. It would be a name of power only, not one to inspire trust and loyalty. Unlike yours.”*

“As much as it irks me,” Sulivhaan said as he looked at her. He didn’t stand up. “Take the name. You made this happen, Ilea. We all know it. And the world should know it too.”

She looked at him and smiled. “*You were the one to send me to Ravenhall, to join the Shadow’s Hand.”*

“I did. But it was you who brought these beings together,” Sulivhaan answered.

“The Lilith Accords,” Ilea said out loud.

The name felt like a weight on her shoulders. As much as she just wanted to travel and explore the world, with few to no responsibilities, she felt that things were changing, at least a little. While she almost instinctively wanted to refuse, Ilea also found herself wanting to be here. It felt right. Because she was a part of this. A part of this alliance, a part of the Sentinels, a part of Hallowfort, and a part of Ravenhall.

“Okay,” she said.

Claire looked at her with knowing eyes, smiled ever so slightly, and gave her a slow nod. “Then let us read, and sign if you agree.”

Ilea breathed in deep. She still looked at the name at the top of the document. Then she looked at all the beings at the large table. All her friends and companions. People she had fought beside against demons, spirits, and corruption.

She read through the pages, one article after the next. Trade. Teleportation. Monster attacks. Communication. Notes on local law. Future negotiations, both within the alliance and with others. Then came the purpose of the document.

‘The Lilith Accords lays the groundwork for the cooperation and peace of city-states and nations within its alliance. Its goals lie in the betterment of the lives of all its citizens, in the security of its settlements and peoples, in the open trade of goods, knowledge, and services, and in the joint exploration and tackling of local and large-scale disputes and obstacles. Cooperation and openness shall be the foundations of this new age of long-range teleportation. May we prosper, together.’

Feels weighty, she thought. *And quite absurd. First getting to this world, then traveling west, joining the Hand, meeting the team, going to Virilya, then to the north, meeting Elfie, then Catelyn, the Descent, Violence and the corruption, the Ascended, Erendar and the Daughters of Sephilon, and finally Arthur Redleaf’s obsession with the Taleen gates. And now we’re here.*

She thought of Felicia. It felt wrong that she wasn’t here, but she was sure the Empire would get involved in all this sooner rather than later. Ilea hoped things would remain somewhat amicable – not between her and Felicia, whom she trusted more than most, but between the Empire of Lys and this new alliance.

Who else would join us? What will we be able to do? With the gates? With our combined resources? With access to the north and south? And what role will I play in all that?

She smiled to herself and breathed out slowly.

I suppose I’ll find out in time.

Ilea took a pen and signed the document, adding her mana signature like she had all that time ago with her Shadow contract.

“So,” Ilea said after a while as the first people got up and continued their own conversations. “Second feast?”

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SEVENTY-SIX

History

It was some time later, and many of the others had already left, splitting off to show off their magic or discuss specific trade deals. Ilea was finishing her second feast, watching the two Fae twirling around each other.

"Kind of feels like old times," Trian said as he leaned back in his chair.

"Nowhere near the same," Kyrian said.

Claire joined them and nodded. "Deals secured. I see the team is back together."

Ilea smiled.

"Meadow, can we get a teleport up? It should be night, right?"

"It is. Here you go," the Meadow answered, moving them all up to the northern landscape. It was a near-cloudless night, with seas of mist all around them and moonlight shining down from above.

Ilea stretched and sat down on a chair made of ash, a cold bottle of ale in hand. As she relaxed, she formed three additional chairs next to her as she watched her friends looking out at the northern landscape in awe.

"No wonder you like it here," Trian said, refusing the bottle that she offered.

"You should see it by day," Ilea said. "You might even survive the lightning."

"I understand it's arcane in nature. I could try, but not without supervision."

Ilea pointed down. "We're still very much in the Meadow's domain."

A dome-like shield flickered to life around them for a split second.

"Nice one."

"Always here, always watching," the Meadow replied with a space magic wink, before its presence retreated again.

Kyrian glanced at Ilea and smiled, then looked back out at the mists.

"I wish I had time for some barrier magic discussions with the Meadow," Claire said, sighing as she sat down.

"What are your thoughts?" Ilea asked.

"On the Accords? I'm elated, of course. And we faced far less opposition from Sulivhaan and Elana than we expected. If anything, their caution has brought our parties closer together. I know you care little for legalese, but this one is impressively written. It's just a legal document, but it's a great start."

Trian smiled. "Good preparation and even better opportunities help smooth things over. Even the worst enemies would find a way to agree under these circumstances, and we're not enemies. Far from it."

"Gaining acceptance from the citizens of our cities – and those of other countries – will be the more difficult task," Claire said.

"Yes," Trian agreed. "But a suitable show of wealth, technology, and power will be enough to convince them. And before they know it, the world will have changed."

"It's good to be here," Kyrian said, sitting down in his chair. "With all of you. It's quite a sight. If you had told me a few years ago that this is where we'd be now…"

"With teleportation gates and four-marks on our side," Claire said.

"Don't forget the Sentinels," Ilea added.

"And our very own three-mark human," Trian said.

"I'm not too far off from that either, you know," Kyrian said.

Ilea winked at him. "Try to keep up, then."

Kyrian just smiled and sighed.

They were quiet for a little while, watching the endless dance of mist in the starlit lands of the north.

"Quite a journey," Trian said.

"Mmm," Ilea mused. "Team thirty-four," she said, instinctively checking her dominion for any signs of Eve. Her gaze went up.

You would've loved the view, I'm sure.

Kyrian touched her shoulder.

“So,” Trian said. “This is where you fought a dragon?”

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Acknowledgments

Thank you very much for reading book 7 of Azarinth Healer. I hope you liked it :).

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All the best. See you in book 8! Rhaegar

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