

Ilea appeared in her home at noon on 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, seeing the signs of exposure on the stone floor. A quick cleanse from 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, far into 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’

She put her remaining fifteen stat points into vitality and summoned herself a meal. *When’s the last time I slept?* the thought came to her when she saw her bed and bookshelves up in her room. She’s barely been here in months. In a way the Meadow’s domain felt more like home than this place did at this point. The initial idea of the house was supposed to be 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 too much stuff to do. But I’ll get some sleep again soon, she said to herself, not quite believing the words as she enjoyed the food. Sleeping had always been such a joy, 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 those hot spring baths in the last few days, and the tournament was somewhat enjoyable. Should probably move the library into the Soul Forge though, then I can take breaks in front of a hearth instead of half a continent away.*

She blinked up into her bedroom and spread out her ash, storing every book inside her domain. *Now it looks downright abandoned,* she thought, looking at the sight. *Kind of surprising that nobody ever broke in so far. Not like it’s too far away from Ravenhall. A quick flight.* She raised her brows, realizing that not everyone had wings or her flight speed. Let alone the fact that most humans didn’t just go into the wilderness. Adventurers only, and they would more likely understand not to fuck with someone who had their house in this location.

Not like there’s a lot of treasure anyway. Maybe I should design a dungeon or something. Or take one over as the monster at the end of it. Hmm, not really my style. And the people who’d break in would be pitifully weak.

Fighting incomprehensible creatures in other realms still appealed way more to her than such a stationary thing. She considered it as a potential retirement plan in a few thousand years. Ilea

appeared above her home and spread her wings, quickly checking the cats in the nearby cavern. *All grown up now.*

She couldn't see all of them either. *Moved out, definitely. Into a nice cave a few miles away.* Her ashen wings moved, the slightly cindered form shot up towards the cliff's edge. It was a little late for breakfast, but she decided to get brunch instead. Somehow the lack of sleeping had to be compensated after all.

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 confronted her, two of them quickly confirming that she was in fact Lilith.

"Can you inform the Head Administrator that I'm having brunch over there?" she asked one of the mages that looked at her for a little longer than the others, her hand pointing at the establishment.

The woman's eyes opened wide and she nodded immediately, bowing her head as her face turned red. She left with the others, her movements a little delayed.

Telepathy. So very useful. Three marks just confuses people, a higher level just makes them cocky. But get into someone's head with your voice and the stories all suddenly ring true.

A few seconds later, she sat down at one of the small tables on the terrace. She chose a spot at one of the corners, the view of the mountain range quite enjoyable. Ilea wondered for a moment if she should teleport her brunch north to Scipio's location but decided to remain. It would take several hours for the location in her house to be available again.

The waitress was new, Ilea's casual clothes and Monstrous preventing her from seeming like some kind of three mark monster. A welcome detail, only marred slightly by the patrons that had seen her land, or even her short interaction with nine Shadowguards.

The woman made larger and larger eyes as the order went on and on, slowly nodding as she wrote everything down on a small notepad. She did a double take when she was done, looking at Ilea 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. "Thanks for the work you provide."

"I don't provide any work. I just paid gold to someone at some point. Say thanks to whoever manages this place," Ilea answered.

"I eh... will. Thanks, I'll have your order here as fast as possible."

"No rush. I've got time," she answered and watched the woman rush off. *Still weird. Not like I did anything other than find a shit ton of gold in some Taleen ruin.*

She sighed and leaned back on the comfortable chair, ignoring the creaking noise of the steel as she subtly reinforced it with some ash.

Now that I see it... they replaced all the chairs. Her eyes squinted at nobody in particular. *Must be a coincidence.*

Claire stepped out from the stairwell and glanced around, her eyes falling on Ilea before she smiled. Her black hair was open 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 appeared behind one of the chairs. "There you are," she said and sat down, facing the sun.

"You sound downright elated," Ilea mused. "Good news?"

Claire closed her eyes as she leaned back in the chair, a sigh leaving her 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 you being a workaholic," Ilea said.

Claire waved her off. "Just been a while. Important work is important work. I'm delegating more and more, but with the..." she said and looked around. "Project. You know."

Ilea established a telepathic connection. "*This is probably safer,*" she said.

"Useful. Yes. The materials for the teleportation circles are coming along nicely, as are the contracts, the pricing, personnel, and preparations near Ravenhall and in Morhill. Can't wait to get this thing going. We'll have to expand Morhill in no time. We predict it to become an even larger hub of adventurers than even Virilya," she said when the tea arrived.

Not quite coffee, not quite like any tea Ilea had back on earth. *Weird herb water instead of weird bean water. Can't have everything, I suppose,* she thought and sipped on it before she bit into a croissant. Keyla and Popi took her off hand comments very seriously, testing various creations based on her layman knowledge of cooking and baking. Some of their creations had apparently spread through the city already.

"It'll be nice to have the gates around," Ilea mused. Talking with a full mouth wasn't an issue anymore either with telepathy, a benefit she hadn't really considered before.

"Not like you need them. But even for the Shadow's Hand it should increase our efficiency ten fold if not more," Claire said.

"A ten times higher chance to die fighting," Ilea said in a dry tone.

"Not with a Sentinel or five around," Claire mused. *"They're coming along well. Your dealings with the various Healing Orders left an impression. Trian is sailing smoothly and the healers are progressing faster than perhaps even you,"* she teased and sipped on her tea.

"Good. Maybe the cults will form around them instead of me," she answered. *"Got a potential new city for negotiations. The Pit, 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 downright covered in a mist of steel."*

"Very helpful," Claire said. *"Production is the major point where we can't compete with the existing kingdoms and the Empire. That and their numbers, but we both know how irrelevant that part is in reality."*

Ilea smiled and moved on to the next plate. *"Got gold and a bunch of properties there as well. We kind of... abused their obsession with betting. Maybe don't be too pushy about that stuff for a while,"* she said and quickly moved all the papers and 2800 gold into her bracelet. She touched Claire's hand before she allowed her to access the item.

“That’s... substantial. Wonderful,” the woman said with a grin before she summoned one of the contracts. Two seconds she looked at it before it vanished again. *“Old, well written, marked with several magical seals and downright beautiful in design. Whatever this Pit is, I already like it.”*

“You should somehow get your hands on their cannon defense system. Enough power to blast away even four marks,” Ilea mused, remembering the impact, her chest tightening up a little.

Claire raised her brows. *“That sounds promising. Our defensive measures are getting better every month but if we don’t have the people to fight the threat directly, all it really does is delay it.”*

“But you have me,” Ilea said, eating a bite of a sweet jam filled pastry.

“We can’t build our whole security around your existence. You don’t want to be a goddess, I believe,” she said.

“No, and I’m not quite as stationary as the Meadow. But Aki alone should probably be able to defend the town against most reasonable threats already. He got an upgrade.”

“He did now? Again? Well, it’s not like the Sentinels have a bad reputation, and we can ignore the few Shadows voicing their issues with the influence your organization has on the city,” Claire said.

“You’re perfectly unbiased,” Ilea joked.

“Why would I be unbiased? They’re idiots losing what little control they thought they had, decades ago. And you’re providing reasonable progress on every front. There’s a reason our cities in the south are still seeing a large influx of immigrants both trained and high level, as well as untrained or refugees. And the Shadowguard is gaining a lot of experience in turn. The crime levels remain lower than in most other cities that have actual documentation on these statistics. Plus I’m sure they adjust their numbers.”

Ilea refilled her cup from the steaming pot. *“You sound more like an Empress every time we talk.”*

Claire grinned and filled her plate. *“I trust you to dethrone me if the power corrupts me to that extent. Not that I could add more work onto my table as it is. I’m taking a week off after the gates are established. Maybe visit the North you’ve talked about so much.”*

“Sure. You can probably get an office in the Soul Forge too,” Ilea said, receiving a questioning glance. A few minutes later, she had told the sad story of Khan Joggoth and what finally happened to his research facility.

“And you call me a workaholic with people like Iana and Christopher in your employ,” Claire said.

“Just because there are people worse than you doesn’t mean you’re fine,” Ilea said. *“Maybe you could take a month off, work on other projects and ideas if you have any. Would be a good way to test if Ravenhall can handle all the work in case you get killed by some renegade Greater Lich.”*

“You say that like it’s a distinct possibility,” Claire answered. *“But it might be a good idea. After the gates. There are places I wish to visit, people I wish to talk to, all over the Plains. And beyond,”* she said.

“Good,” Ilea said and checked the marks on Kyrian and Trian, both somewhere in the mountain range about forty kilometers to the southwest. *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. Empire is doing good work preventing them from setting up a coordinated force. The high level of independence most cities

enjoy helps of course, but a large chunk of their labor is gone. Lots of crime. I hear many of the Sentinels are making a name for themselves there. What's his name, Gael? Already a local hero. Not quite like the mythical Lilith but perhaps more personal. Graspable," Claire said with a smile. *"Relations with Kroll have continued steadily, though they're more hesitant with their agreements than Lys. Understandable considering their resources and position. And well, you haven't exactly shown your power to the Empress in a direct manner like you did with Emmanuel Eilhart."*

"Shouldn't that make him more willing to cooperate?" Ilea asked.

"Not necessarily. He has to consider nobility. After your display, he has to make sure those under him believe him still in a position of power. If they act too fast or are too courteous in their negotiations, it will seem like they're not in control. Which in turn would lead to unrest both in their nobility and peoples. But it's clear they respect our power, more so even than Lys. Even though Lys has more of an idea of our overall capabilities," Claire explained.

"They just see the benefits I suppose. Velamyr should trust me to an extent, and Felicia obviously, though I don't know how much influence they would have on the Empress," Ilea said.

"Plenty. She is known to listen to the right people at the right time. With no invitation for you or the Council to visit Virilya, she must have more than enough trusted information on everyone involved," Claire said.

"Easy enough to acquire," Ilea answered.

"I have an inkling that the Lily has a part to play in that as well. Helena takes you very seriously. As a potential threat that is, I'm unsure as to her more personal opinions," she said.

"You think the Empress is part of them too?" Ilea asked.

Claire sipped from her tea and ate another bite. *"We don't know. I'm sure she tolerates them. Just like other empires and monarchies do."*

Ilea remained quiet for a while. The situation in the plains seemed to have stabilized somewhat, with King Baron gone. She noticed that most of the people around them had left by now, no new patrons joining them on the terrace. A waiter stood at the bottom of the stairs. More curious than that was the cloaked figure standing in an alleyway nearby, well hidden sound magic coming from the man. *"How have you been?"* she asked. Claire had leveled twice since she had last seen her.

"You don't need to worry about me, Ilea. I enjoy the work on most days, and when I don't, I love it," she said with a grin. *"We're just different, you and I. Trian makes me keep the training schedule up, he's been more pushy lately. Which is good. I tend to find solutions to problems I've been stuck on for days after I come back from a bit of fighting."*

"A bit of balance goes a long way," Ilea mused. *"Cloaked figure using sound magic to listen in on us with you by the way?"*

Claire didn't react visibly. *"No. But we've been seeing more spies from pretty much all around the plains."*

"Mind if I play with him a little? Or would that constitute an international incident?" Ilea asked.

"Sure you're not some monstrosity yet? I'd prefer to have him interrogated by the Shadowguard. If you can refrain from killing him," Claire answered.

"I think I'll manage. I hope you're not talking about torture when you say interrogate?" she said.

“We know your stance on the matter. And others in the council agree with you. Imprisonment and simple talks can lead to a lot already. Torture will often simply make them to say what you want to hear. Ravenhall has the resources to make arrangements with talented high level individuals like that man surely is. They’re often working for more than one side,” she said and paused. *“Non stationary information brokers, with a flair for danger. Are you sure this conversation cannot be heard by anyone?”*

“Hmm... never actually asked that question. It’s a direct low level mind magic connection. I think I would notice if someone tried to connect to it. I’ve experienced some incredibly subtle mind magic, from creatures far beyond what most humans should be able to do,” she answered. *“You mentioned dancing earlier.”*

“Indeed. But it’s a bit early, and I’ll have to digest this brunch,” Claire said. *“Sundown?”*

“That sounds wonderful, yes,” Ilea answered. She looked down towards the man and smiled. His form vanished instantly. *“I’ll be there,”* she sent and filled herself a plate, leaving a few silver pieces on the table before she jumped down and followed the dissipating line through the fabric itself.