

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.”

She wore a set of casual clothes, her usual city exploration attire.

[War Machine Engineer – lvl 230]

Pierce looked at the dwarf and started laughing.

“Anything funny?” he asked, standing up now. His machine reached nearly three meters, the heavy steel dented and cut in a few places, one of the shoulders near 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 in an annoyed voice and walked past, the dwarf giving her a wary eye.

Ilea wondered what they’d even do with the soul warden. The steel itself hadn’t seemed particularly impressive. It was the regenerative qualities and their swords that made them formidable foes, especially for their level.

A small stone shack had been raised in a small yard to the side of the building, several dwarves 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 below a war machine. Her thick brown hair was braided perfectly, keen green eyes taking 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,” she mused.

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,” the administrator said. “Very well then. How would you like to join? Alone, as a group, 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?” she said.

“I do. Do I have to use it?” Pierce asked.

“The Forged Dome is 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. 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,” Marilla explained.

Pierce grinned. “I see. Then there won’t be any issues. I am allowed to continue the battle if my war machine is taken out?”

“Of course,” the dwarf said and smiled. She shook her head lightly and summoned a large tome. Her hands moved to flick it open. “When can you fight?”

“Two days was it?” Pierce asked, looking back at Ilea.

“Yeah,” Ilea mused and addressed 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 slight grin. “I’m the only one who knows the levels, nor are they documented at all. And I... am impartial,” she said, her joyous demeanor making 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. “Two days. At the twentieth hour. Dragonkiller Pierce. Or should we announce you in a different manner?”

“Just Dragonkiller is best,” the Elder said with a grin.

“Perfect. That alone will attract hundreds. Just make sure people don’t find out who you are, or you’ll be having assassins on your back soon enough,” Marilla said. “Some powerful... investors, don’t take kindly to outsiders messing with their established champions.”

“You don’t seem too bothered by that,” Ilea said.

“As I said, I am impartial. Or as close to that ideal as I can be. Which is why I’m still here. And have been for centuries,” the dwarf said. “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 and stepped away, the others joining her as they walked back towards Bralin’s workplace. “Your fight is just an hour before mine,” she said to Pierce.

“And I expect you lot to cheer me on,” the woman 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,” Pierce said.

“Hmm, you’re not wrong. But I don’t feel too bad acting like this in your presence,” Ilea said.

“Her arrogance is well founded,” one of the Shades said.

“Indeed. She is beyond all sapient beings we have met,” the other added.

“Not beyond the ones we met,” Verena said.

“Not even close,” Ilea confirmed.

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 wondered if the Meadow would become some kind of pilgrimage destination in the future. Just that well, it wouldn’t be a pilgrimage but a teleportation trip to the north. *Visit the ancient tree and receive its guidance! Only fifty pieces of gold.*

She assumed it would actually work. Her reputation as Lilith would already allow her to form a money sucking cult. Not that she ever planned to do something like that. Compared to her however, the Meadow didn’t exactly have a way to leave its domain. *And yet nobody would be able to enter it either. Not against its will.*

“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,” she said, glancing at Pierce.

“Perfect. I’ll need every minute to train with that machine,” the Elder said.

Is she actually excited about this? Definitely sounds like it. Ilea hoped the woman would win her battles, she really wanted them to meet in the Forged Dome. *The fated battle between the two emerging champions.*

“Already back?” 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 to it now. Moreover there were a few tubes added to the major joints at the elbows, shoulders, knees, and boots.

The woman whistled. She appeared close to 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,” he said, tapping the machine’s arm with his. “Now those are the shades you mentioned, I see. Greetings.”

“Greetings, maker,” they whispered in sync.

“Shadow touched. Rare to see your kind these days,” he said.

“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 with a smile.

“Careful, or it will stick,” Verena warned.

“Plenty do already, what’s one more?” Ilea said. “We’re looking to get to the Soul Forge before anybody else reaches it, and certainly before our battles. You wanted to join us?”

“Of course. Officially, I’m to search the pit for more of the Soul Warden swords,” Bralin said.

“I’m sure we’ll find a few more on the way,” Ilea said. “Ready to leave then? Or do you need to prepare things?”

“I’ve got everything in my storage amulet,” he said and tapped the massive steel chest of his war machine.

“Same,” Ilea said and glanced at the Elders and Shades.

“We may 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 I believe,” 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.

“Perfect, then let’s leave,” Ilea said and appeared on top of Pierce’s armor, sitting down on the shoulder.

The Elder vanished into her armor and powered it up. Her steps were slow and considerate. “Oh... this seems easier,” she said, her voice slightly muffled from behind the thick steel visor of her helmet.

“The added tubes should help you move. Weighs the whole thing down just a little more but with your level and mana it shouldn’t be much of an issue,” Bralin explained as he made for the exit.

“I will expect you to pay for the ride,” Pierce said as Verena appeared on her other shoulder.

“You got training wheels,” Ilea mused.

“What’s that?” Verena asked.

Pierce focused on following the dwarf, her blue machine shadowed by the two Dark Ones behind.

“Yeah, you guys don’t have bikes here,” Ilea added. “A support device for children, helps them learn to drive a certain vehicle.”

“I see,” Verena answered.

“Told you she’s not from here,” Pierce said in a muffled voice, wobbling a little to the right.

“Focus on walking, young one,” Ilea said.

They wobbled towards the pit. The massive war machine garnered more than a few looks, not only because of the two human women sitting on its shoulders. Pierce had luckily already improved when they reached the abyss like hole.

Ilea 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.

Ilea glanced over. “To Elos you mean? No. I became a space mage much later.”

"I'm sorry. It couldn't have been easy," the woman said.

Pierce snorted from below. "Look at her, she's doing well enough."

Ilea tapped the helmet with her knuckles. "It was... a change, to be sure. But honestly, I'm glad it happened. There is no magic where I'm from. And flying around with wings is just better than traffic. 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, using 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 and walked forward and over the edge.

Ilea smiled and held on to the shoulder piece. She kept an eye on the others, seeing Bralin follow with shaking head and a grin on his face. The Shades followed without hesitation, flying after them with their magic. She held down her shirt as the wind made her clothes flutter, her hair flowing upwards.

Verena held on too, fewer wind relates issues with her armor.

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 started laughing. She spread her wings when they were about to reach the entrance area to the tomb. Her hands raised, she used her 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 when they floated past and formed a gate below Pierce.

The war machine was swallowed by the field and spit out about fifty meters above. 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 murmured.

Ilea landed on her shoulder. "You're a little too envious, that's all."

"I have powerful spells too," the Dragonkiller said, more to herself than to Ilea.

“Sure you do,” Ilea answered and patted her steel helmet. She started healing the woman’s mind when she didn’t reply.

“Stop that,” Pierce hissed.

Ilea laughed, eliciting another hiss. “You’re becoming more Elvish by the day.”

“Back in the dungeon,” Verena reminded them.

Ilea shut up. She knew the Elder was just annoyed about their bickering. Perhaps she had pushed Pierce a little too far as well, it was hard to gauge for her, not having known the woman for nearly as long. She decided not to apologize either, assuming that would just make things worse. *Not that she’s wrong. She does have insane power. But there’s always another Drake, eh?*

They reached the collapsed section again, Ilea forming 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 similar cooldown as her Fabric Tear itself.

“What kind of creatures did you fight here?” Bralin asked with bated breath.

“Bunch of undead,” Ilea said. “Flesh titans, priests, devourers,” she added.

“Devourers? As in more than one? They’re four mark beings...,” the dwarf murmured.

Pierce walked ahead with the other women on her shoulders, the three 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 belonged to?”

The dwarf shook his head slowly. “No. But there are other tombs like this one in the pit. Mostly 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. Caught it in a set of barriers after it killed about three dozen people. Cannons ended it,” he recalled. “A glorious day it was.”

“Good thing they’re not the smartest things alive,” Ilea said.

“Most monsters aren’t,” he said. “Even I could likely do more damage to the Pit than the less powerful four marks coming 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 that many?” Ilea asked with a grin.

They reached the cave with the temple like structure and moved past, soon at 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 melted to near unrecognizable chunks of metal.

“What unsightly beast is haunting these caverns?” Pierce asked in a terrified voice from within her armor. She summoned her warden blade into metal hands, blue lightning flaring up along its length.

Nearly as good looking as my fire, Ilea thought as she watched the sparks move.

“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 exclaimed, lost for words for a few seconds as he just stared at the carnage.

Ilea formed her mantle now before she jumped off and summoned her own war machine, warden blade in hand. “Lead us then,” she said in a deep voice, her helmet looking towards the Shadow Touched.

They both bowed before they floated around and past her.

“Do you not want the metal?” Bralin asked as the group continued.

“Think it’s worth hanging on to?” Ilea asked and made one of the steel bodies float up with a raised hand.

“It’s an alloy,” Bralin said. “But I doubt anybody in the Pit has figured out its make quite yet. You should show it to Goliath the next time you meet him,” he said and refrained from touching any of the metal.

“You can have these, I’m already holding on to a few,” she said. 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.