

Ilea appeared near Riverwatch, her preparations done. She found her friend resting against a nearby tree, the location of her gate marker known only to a select few. It was early evening, a few clouds visible on the horizon, the suns casting long shadows into the forest ahead.

“You look stressed,” the man said as he glanced her way.

**[Metal Mage – lvl 508]**

“You’re not the only one who was busy,” Ilea answered. “Besides, you did hear about the attacks.”

Kyrian motioned in the direction of the city, the cleanup still very much going on. Smoke still rose from the distant fires caused by the extensive battle.

Extensive for the standards of Riverwatch.

Ilea remembered the elven attack after her arrival in Elos. It had been chaos, entire sections of the city destroyed, hundreds dead, more injured. The results here would’ve been far worse, were it not for the gates, all the people arriving due to the Accords, and her own involvement.

*Salia fell to a few groups of young Elves.* With the gates alone, something like that was far less likely to happen, and still she felt tense. This was nothing compared to what she had seen in her travels. Even for the Taleen it had been a small army. Not a single Executioner, few variants, and fewer Praetorians. The Pursuer was the main danger, but she assumed it had been hunting for her, or someone that knew more about her.

*And the same might happen with the Architect, once he actually wants to bother with getting back his artifacts.* She didn’t assume him to be someone who would simply forget about an incursion like that. Especially now that he had tried and failed to take her out, sacrificing an entire facility in doing so.

They had to be prepared. She had to be prepared.

Ilea didn’t plan to live in fear of what may or may not come to hunt for her or her allies. She wanted to be untouchable, not an Oracle, Monarch, Pursuer, Meadow, or Ascended able to threaten her.

She could just choose a home, a domain of her own. Where she could rest up between explorations, where she could build something and study her magic. But her ties had grown and whilst she could understand some of the Oracle’s arguments, she didn’t buy into their approach. Riverwatch was proof that her actions had a tangible impact on people. She had both perhaps caused the attack but had prevented a massacre in turn. Her and the people she had brought together.

Collecting the keys was an effort to help out the elves in the first place. And now she had all of them, and a way to perhaps stop the being that caused millennia of warfare. The Oracles wouldn’t care, she had suspected as much before but now she knew. The males would react in different ways. Some would look for those responsible, others would simply continue with their lives, unaffected by the machines in the first place. But plenty would get a chance at living, perhaps a little longer than their current situation allowed.

Death may be part of life, but with enough Vitality and healing, that life would last far longer.

“Had an annoying conversation too,” she said. “With a being far too old to retain any kind of influence.”

“You’re not friends with the Meadow anymore?” the man asked as he summoned two meals, moving one over to her on a tray of metal.

“Not the Meadow,” she said. “We should move on, more attacks could happen.”

“And we’re here to stop them. Sit down and eat,” Kyrian said.

Ilea raised a brow, taking in a deep breath before she grabbed the food and sat down, the tree creaking slightly as she leaned against it.

A single bite revealed that she wasn’t Keyla’s only customer who kept some of her creations in their storage items. *He got an upgrade too*, she noted, seeing the steam rising from the curry style dish.

“The world has changed quite a bit,” Kyrian said after a while, their plates empty as they watched the busy western city.

“That it has,” Ilea said.

“I visited some of the northern cities in the past week. Have you had a chance yet?” he asked.

“I’m not sure which cities you mean. In the northern plains?” Ilea asked.

“No,” he said. “North of Hallowfort. The Dark Protector managed to establish a few more stable settlements. They came out on top in a few important battles against the Feynor. And they’re more favorable now towards Hallowfort. Due to the Meadow and the Accords,” he explained.

“I haven’t had the chance to travel too much in the past months,” Ilea said. The main relaxing thing she did was visiting Felicia, and even that has been more rare in the past weeks. The woman was rising in Virilya, more work piled onto her desk every time Ilea visited.

“You should relax a little after this,” Kyrian said. “You’ve been pushing yourself too hard. I can tell. You get... different.”

“Feeling the weight of my power you mean?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. I know how it feels. While I may not be the myth that is Lilith, my impact on the world could be... a lot,” he spoke.

“A lot?”

He looked up at a cloud. “Yes. In whatever way I choose. I would rather stay with Aliana for some time, ignore all the monsters in the wild, all the dangers, all the dungeons to explore, and all the conflicts between factions of sapient beings.” Kyrian smiled, glancing her way now. “But I do care. And so do you.”

“At least I’m not the only one who deals with this,” Ilea said. She reinforced the tree with ash, seeing some of the roots pushing out of the ground.

“You’re not. Nor were you, or will you ever be the only one. But thanks to the Meadow, Hallowfort is stable. Trade is flourishing throughout the plains thanks to the Accords that mostly you brought together. And I’m not stuck on an island somewhere in the west, going mad as I continue to eat Bluebird meat,” Kyrian said.

“Thanks for the pep talk,” she said. “Just feels strange. Sitting here, and talking.” She looked over at him. “I just met an Elven Oracle.”

He raised his brows. “You did? How was it? Did you fuck it?”

Ilea threw a rock at him, enhanced with quite a bit of space magic, and some fire. It glanced off his skull, cutting through a nearby tree before it dug into the earth. “I didn’t fucking fuck it.”

“Would’ve made for a good story,” he said with a smile.

“You’re talking big now. I remember the stuttering man in my bed,” she said.

“Well, yes. That was me then. This is me now. As impressive as the tales?” he said.

Ilea leaned her head against the tree. “More so, maybe. I don’t think the level it... she? Was at, really did her justice. I could barely use space magic. No teleportation for dozens of kilometers. Well not none at all but nothing short ranged. She looked... strange, as if she lived in her own little dimension. I think I caught an actual glimpse when she got close during Primordial Shift.”

“Ice magic I assume?” he asked.

“Yes. But nothing like I’ve seen before... well... the Elemental was probably up there. But Icy had a more... on hands approach to magic. The Oracle was just freaky. Slowed my healing, and at one point her aura just froze my arm. Entirely, with a third tier resistance and all my healing. Broke into pieces as if I was some low level rabbit struck by a Shadow’s spell.”

He smiled. “I would’ve been dead in a heartbeat.”

“Who knows. You got your evolutions too. I can tell,” she said.

“Yeah... but again, I’m no mythical... Wanderer,” he said.

“Oh right. Title. You’ll have to kill a one five creature before hitting seven fifty,” she said. “I’ll tell you guys about the requirements at some point.”

He laughed. “Don’t think that will be a concern for some time. Unlike some people, I can’t just move between realms to find dangerous beings.”

She raised a finger. “Not yet.”

“I don’t plan on it. But maybe I’ll find a few Fae in my travels like you did,” he mused.

“Could ask Violence for some help. Or the Meadow could train you,” she suggested.

“I’m quite happy knowing where I am,” he said. “But who knows. If we live to a hundred, that’s a lot of time. We might even reach five hundred.”

“A thousand years of battle,” Ilea said.

“Sounds exhausting,” he replied.

“It sounds awesome. Issue is with finding worthy things to fight. Sooner or later I’ll be bedding Oracles and fighting Dragons,” she said and stood up, cracking her fists and neck.

“Why not bed Dragons too?” he asked.

“Don’t get cocky, young curse mage,” Ilea said. “You’re talking to the legendary Lilith.”

“All I see is a Wanderer,” he spoke.

Ilea smiled and transferred to the waiting Feyrair, the Elf having contacted her half an hour prior. She found him meditating within an arcane storm.

“*Very cinematic,*” she sent upon arrival, using telepathy mostly because of the very loud impacts. One bolt struck her a second later, unable to get through even one layer of her mantle.

“*Welcome to the North,*” the elf sent back. He ignored her use of Earth words, used to her random comments by now.

She watched a bolt of arcane lightning slam into the elf, the ground around him cracking as the energy moved through him. He took in a deep breath. “*You seem ready,*” she said.

“*As do you, little human,*” Feyrair said as he stood up. His evolution had indeed made him a little taller, and bulkier.

She teleported the two of them out of the storm and then formed a gate, not about to have arcane lightning get through to Riverwatch. Even some debris flying through could cause substantial damage.

“Here we are,” she said and pushed Fey into the next gate that opened up. “And there we’ll go.” She motioned for Kyrian to get through, the man bowing before he did. She followed after, the space magic vanishing behind her. She was glad the heat from deep below Karth didn’t set the forest in Riverwatch on fire.

“We’re digging now,” Fey commented.

“Yes,” Ilea said and formed a drill, Kyrian in turn gently placing a hand on her shoulder.

“May I try?” he asked, metal seemingly flowing out of his skin, the man growing larger until he was near three meters tall and two wide, his entire form covered in smooth black metal. A slight green sheen was visible all over the surface, though mostly through magical perception only. He turned his head to look at the two, his face entirely covered. Two sets of runes started glowing in dull green light where his eyes would be below, the shapes even resembling the organs.

“You may,” Ilea said.

“Your eyes look Taleen,” Fey murmured.

“I can’t change the color of curse magic,” Kyrian said, his voice slightly dulled, metal pooling below him as a drill was formed to fill the tunnel. It started spinning, Kyrian landing on the round central bit before a pulse of magic sent them down into the earth with thunderous sounds.

Ilea glanced at Fey before they followed, flying behind the fast moving excavation mage. She occasionally moved debris out of the way with her space magic but the sheer weight and momentum he conjured with his steel and magic was enough to pulverize or push away anything in his way. It left the tunnel with a surprisingly durable structure.

“*A little to the right... yes... bit more. Got it,*” she sent after a while, adjusting the path according to the many marks spread throughout the Plains and beyond.

They continued for a few hours, Ilea soon adding her own ash to get additional push, Feyrair using his pure strength instead.

“*We’re getting close. Should probab-*” Ilea sent when a glowing field appeared in her dominion, the drill hitting a magical barrier a moment later. The impact sent a shock wave up and through the tunnel, the entire vicinity shaking. Debris fell, a broad crack forming on one side of the shaft.

Ilea flew down to the others, Kyrian's metal spreading out to clear away the last bits of stone covering the barrier magic. Golden light shined below, undisturbed by the heavy impact of magically infused metal.

"What..." she murmured, flying down until she reached the thing. Ilea had seen more complex barriers, but she wasn't sure if she had ever seen magic as potent as what she perceived through her dominion. "You guys are seeing this, right?"

"This is... impossible," Feyrair said as he approached.

"Don't touch it," Ilea said and slapped away his hand.

"We already crashed into it," he said.

"Which could be anything to whatever detection it has included. Or at worst it knows Kyrian's magic," she said.

"This is... Ilea," Kyrian said as he looked between them with the green runes on his metal helmet.

"He knows," she said. *"And yes. We should still be a sizable distance away from the capital... with how insanely powerful this barrier is... and how far it should span. What else could power such a thing?"*

"The Source used to power a barrier?" Fey asked.

"Why not?" Ilea said. *"Should be easy enough to set up with all the machines, knowledge, and time the One without Form had available. It might even be an ancient defense mechanism by the Taleen."*

"Can you get us through?" Kyrian asked.

*"With force alone... no. Never. This is far, and I mean far beyond what even the Meadow can conjure. But where the Meadow is a grandmaster space mage, whoever designed this... was only a master. I'm almost tempted to show this to the tree somehow,"* she said.

"Meaning you can get us through," Kyrian sent.

*"It will take time, and the enchantments are changing, though not at a pace that would be impossible to figure out. Though once we're in... it may be difficult to get out. And while unlikely, there is a chance that it's a trap,"* she sent to them both.

*"We're planning to attack the capital of the Taleen. Whatever trap it may be, we are prepared,"* Feyrair sent.

Ilea watched the bright golden barrier, wondering if the Azarinth Star had something in common with the conjuration before her. It looked similar, but she wasn't a barrier mage by any means. *Maybe Elfie can figure something out. Thinking of which.*

*"I think it's time we got in the reinforcements, maybe dig out a perimeter. I do believe there were a few Earth Mages in that dilapidated ruin the Hunters chose as their meeting point. Probably best if you two come with me, just in case there's more to this barrier than we can tell."*

"I would like to try and destroy it," Fey said.

"I mean, me too. Obviously," Ilea said. *"But we don't know what happens if we attack. Let's have Niivalyr check it out at least. And all the other Elves. Then we try to smack our heads against it."*

He hissed in stubborn approval.

Ilea set the new gate location, making some distance first in case the barrier reacted to her space magic. Nothing happened however and she activated her third tier transfer, adding Fey and Kyrian as she focused on the mark left on Ben.

They appeared in the Praetorian facility soon after, interrupting a bout between Asay and Elfie.

The latter looked over and hissed. "The time has come."

"Our purpose will be g-" Farthorn started when Fey hissed.

"Shut it. I want to hit a barrier," the Dragonling said, receiving a hiss in return.

"They're getting excited," Ilea said.

"Another human," Asay commented as he floated closer. "Curse magic... interesting. It will be good to have you on our side, stranger. I am Asay Veer. Cerithil Hunter."

"Kyrian," the man replied. "Shadow."

"Not a man of many words, I see. We shall learn of each other through battle, Shadow Kyrian," the elf spoke while the others were hissing at each other.

"Stop it," Ilea said, monster hunter echoing through the hall. "We have more people to gather."

They vanished once more, this time appearing in the Navali forest.

Several dozen Elves hissed at their sudden arrival.

Ilea raised her brows, looking around at the gathered warriors and mages. Many she had seen the last time she had come but there were more now. All waiting, all armored and prepared for battle. Though she supposed one branded as Cursed had to be prepared at all times anyway. Her notice was short too.

Isalthar himself arrived a few seconds later, the elf accompanied by a few other high level Hunters.

"You have arrived," he spoke.

"Yes, and I have a gate ready for us to go through. Not quite as close as I would've liked however," she said. "The dwarven capital is protected by an expansive barrier. We'll likely have to get through with space magic."

"No barrier can stand in our way," Veratin spoke before he hissed, plenty of the others adding to the sound.

"We will investigate it first," Isalthar spoke.

"And set up an area for potential retreat. All we have right now is a tunnel," Ilea said.

"I will see to it," a somewhat burly elf said, his green eyes taking in the new group with interest. Scale armor protected his form, the elf identifying as a level six hundred earth mage.

There were more high level elves present now, most of them Ilea hadn't seen before. A few she gauged to be stronger than even Isalthar, excluding Carthaan, the crystal mage she had already met. Few of them were speaking to each other, though she couldn't be sure they weren't using telepathy or some other way of communication.

It hardly mattered now. They had a common goal. At least for now.