

Ilea waved her hand to teleport away the crystal projectiles. She summoned a set of shields in the way of the largest two she couldn't move with her space magic. "You doing okay?" she sent to her ally flying a few dozen meters away, himself deflecting a bright pink beam of energy with a metal shield of his own.

She saw the metal glow and shatter, just as her shields shattered against the massive weight and momentum of the crystal chunks. Ilea felt another spell of the creature manifest, this time at the top of her skull. The crystal spread quickly, breaking through her mantle right when she ripped it away with her hand. It continued growing, Ilea teleporting up to avoid the crashing projectiles. She used her limbs to cut through her arm, teleporting the affected part of her limb away. She looked at the large creature with squinting eyes.

Seven heads, atop seven necks, all connected to a moving crystal base the size of a mansion. All of it a bright pink, the thing reminding her more of a cheap house decoration item than the monster it was supposed to be. The fact that it flattened entire sections of the Taleen ruin by simply moving around didn't really lend validity to that comparison. She moved her head to the side when a beam of pink energy rushed out from one of the heads, another one summoning a rain of crystal needles.

Ilea answered in kind, with beams of heat and waves of burning ash.

"Sure you don't want to take that third tier resistance?" Kyrian asked.

She teleported close and smashed her fist into one of the heads, arcane energies flashing into the creature, rocking its head to the side, Ilea continuing her assault. She flew up to avoid another one of the heads biting down, a third one striking her with a summoned projectile the size of a car. Instantly she saw the crystal growing, pushing into her ash and eyes from the entire surface area, the projectile meanwhile flying to the other side of the Taleen city. With her in tow.

Ilea would've rolled her eyes, if they weren't being overtaken by powerful crystal growth. "Okay, I guess I will."

'ding' 'Crystal Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1'

Crystal Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

Crystals aren't just shiny decorations to old ruins and caves. You have learned that the arcane scholars have found ways to turn the beautiful natural phenomenon into something quite a bit more deadly. Less deadly to you with this skill.

2nd stage: Your body adapts, crystal growth and transmutation now exponentially harder to achieve on your tissue.

3rd stage: You have faced extraordinary wielders of crystal magic. Your body learns to adapt against specific types of crystal magic. With time, you will find yourself more resilient against enemy crystal magic you have faced before.

Using one of my third tier points against something stupid like this, she thought, teleporting away when she managed to separate the frameworks. The task proved more difficult than she wanted to

admit, the crystal instantly merging with everything it touched. She ripped out her eyes. Again. And healed them.

“I’m in the third tier now. Just stay at a distance and finish your rune setup while I distract it,” Ilea sent, watching the creature shake its form to get rid of the flame of creation. She didn’t remember anything that had dealt with the white flame quite as easily.

[Crystal Hydra of Izverat – lvl ?????]

The creature wasn’t even far above a thousand five hundred. Ilea smiled and summoned her hammer. *“Think you can handle this?”*

She didn’t get a response, throwing the divine artifact towards the creature before she herself followed, ashen limbs moving out as she flew past the beams and projectiles, cutting out chunks of the pink material, shattering entire sections with her fists as her fires continued to spread. Ilea teleported to the side before a beam could slice into her, seeing at an angle how the silver threads of her hammer wrung around one of the long necks of the magical monster.

“Set up is done,” Kyrian informed, the mage floating around sixty meters away now.

“Give it a go,” Ilea sent, cutting off her leg where a set of crystals had started eating into her mantle. She teleported back when she felt the surge of magic all around.

Green runes lit up on the ruins and flattened stone below, more appearing in the air above and beside the enormous monster. A loud thrum resounded when the curse manifested, the magic released like a river flooding down from above, the runes shaking as the Hydra screeched with a strange cracking sound. A one hundred meter high cone of green light. The spell enveloped the entirety of the crystal being and yet when it subsided, the monster remained.

“This is going to take a while,” Ilea sent as her wings pushed her forward, a spinning flame covered drill of ash pushed ahead of her form.

“We should wear normal clothes,” Mila said in a quiet voice as soon as they were done eating.

“Why?” Willa asked.

Ember smiled. *“Oh I get it. So that we don’t seem like military or something. The Guardians are the army. We’re just healers,”* she said and winked.

Willa followed Phoebe and the others to a local tailor, the group acquiring simple traveling clothes and brown cloaks before heading to the northern exit of the town. Clothing and teleportation wasn’t much of an issue. Even at their level, the pay for a Sentinel was formidable, apparently due to the high percentage they received compared to adventurers or even Shadows. Phoebe suspected it had to do with Lilith’s insane wealth but Willa assumed they were just better.

She frowned after they had changed, rolling her shoulders as she mimicked the motion of shooting a bow.

“You’ll be back in your armor in no time,” Phoebe said.

“Just feels wrong,” Willa said. “Kind of exciting too in a way.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t tell someone before we go?” Ember asked.

“It’s more dangerous this way,” Willa said with a grin.

“We have the cube. You know how Aki is. He’s always so concerned,” Phoebe said.

“Barely even cuts through bones. He’s pretty soft for a machine made of metal. Or well, now an army of machines made of metal,” Willa said.

They arrived in the outskirts of Nara less than an hour later, the teleportation gate to Yinnahall far more busy than the subsequent one to their destination.

Willa tugged on her sleeves.

“They’re just normal clothes,” Phoebe said.

“Yeah, but we’re not normal,” Willa said with a frown.

“I agree with her,” Ember said, looking at her brown sleeves.

“What’s wrong, Mila?” Phoebe asked, looking at the pale woman, black eyes staring at the high walls of Nara.

“Did you come from here?” Willa asked, looking at the dead land all around. Nothing great would grow here without the help of a few nature mages. There were a few Guardians present near the gates but they weren’t currently moving anything. She followed her teammate’s gaze and saw the cracks in the walls, house sized boulders sunken deep into the dead earth near the worst damaged sections.

“No,” Mila said. “To the west... weeks of travel. We... we moved south. It took us months, just to get to the Empire.”

“Months?” Willa asked.

“There were slave hunters still. Collectors. Adventurers looking to earn gold, and soldiers...” Mila said and broke off.

“Sorry,” Willa said. She looked up, seeing the gray clouds move past. It had been sunny in Yinnahall, windy and cool in Ravenhall. Here it was just gray.

Mila giggled. “I’m fine. It’s just... strange. That we traveled the same distance just now. With just a few spells.”

“Do you not miss it?” Ember asked. She turned beet red a moment later. “Traveling I mean... not anything to do with your... you know. Your.”

Phoebe chuckled. “Do you miss it?” she asked Ember.

"I... guess. Maybe. We didn't get to travel much, mostly moving from one temple to the other. I liked Halstein. But we were mostly in cities, temples... behind walls. With the gates..." she spoke.

"Yeah, no reason to go out there anymore. Not really," Willa said. "But not for us. Because the monsters are out there, not behind the walls we built."

"Well some monsters are behind walls," Phoebe said, looking towards the ancient city. It lay quiet, some of the high towers visible beyond broken, signs of battle still visible even after all this time.

Willa nodded. "Like the Meadow. Or Aki."

"I think she meant people. That are horrible," Ember said.

"You did?" Willa asked, glancing at Phoebe. "But people aren't monsters."

"It's a metaphor," Phoebe answered.

"A what?" Willa asked.

"Forget it," Phoebe said, shaking her head.

Ember smiled. "It means they behave like monsters but they're still humans. No claws and stuff."

"I see," Willa said and nodded. "So we're really just here to fight monsters. I like that."

"No. We're here to find out what is happening, we should try to avoid a fight if at all possible," Phoebe answered.

"Yeah, yeah," Willa said, though she signed her agreement.

A warm breeze moved through, the four now walking away from the lone teleportation platform about a kilometer outside of Nara. Nobody else had arrived, and nobody else was coming towards them from the city. Without the few Guardians near the gate and the small wooden guard shack with a sleeping attendant inside, one might've mistaken the site for an ancient and forgotten artifact of some lost civilization.

It didn't take them long to reach the gate, the two large stone slabs remaining closed, though a nearby hole in the wall kind of made the immense entrance somewhat useless. A set of guards stood in front of the more obvious entrance, both clad in well worn plate armor, the dark red mostly scrubbed away but still noticeable, especially near the shin guards.

"Battle healers in Nara. Who are you?" one of them said, a spear wielding man with a deep voice. He seemed annoyed at best.

"Battle healers looking to help out where we can," Phoebe said.

The guard paused. "Sure. Entrance fee is one silver per person. Half because you're healers."

"Why is this hole still here?" Willa asked, pointing behind them.

The man sighed.

The other one replied. "The runes to open the gate are busted. This is better. Hardly any monsters in the area anyway."

"Even at night?" Willa asked. She had learned about some freaky creatures that roamed the northern plains in the darkness, many would surely come this far south. They weren't too far away after all.

“Close it off at night,” the second guard said. He was a small man, a set of knives strapped to a belt that went around his battered chest plate. He seemed jumpy.

Willa smiled. “How?”

Phoebe paid the man and waved for them to go through.

“Big ass boulder,” the guard said. “Gorge is strong. Strongest man I’ve seen.”

“Who’s Gorge?” Willa asked.

“We’re going inside,” Phoebe said, signing for them to be careful.

Careful. Sure. Let’s be even more obvious. Willa thought as she waved to the guard and went inside.

Her eyes opened wide when they entered. Not because of the admittedly massive boulder set next to the hole in the wall. The city was in ruins. Hundreds if not thousands of buildings, all made of stone, layered on top of each other. Broken walls, destroyed foundations, some entirely collapsed. Roads she could see blocked by chunks of stone, roots remaining from the magic that had been summoned here from Erendar. Corpses at least she did not see any, though there were obvious signs of magical damage from the battles that had taken place here. In an effort to clear out the remains of the cursed residents.

The Sentinels had more information than most on the happenings in Baralia, but reading about it and seeing it were entirely different things.

Despite the people Willa could see on the large square beyond the main gates, the city seemed hollow. A husk of its former self. She gulped, imagining the blood ritual that had been cast here. The impact it had. The high towers now stood empty, the nobility that had inhabited them long gone, along with their most valuable treasures and their gold. It seemed even the Empire was not interested in this city, or they simply lacked the resources to take care of the extensive damage.

“Why are so few people here?” Willa asked.

“Nara didn’t have a lot to offer other than its high walls and population,” Mila said.

The slave trade. Right.

“I talked to some that had fled from here. Before the... ritual,” Mila said. “When the siege of Virilya demanded a lot of resources from the cities and the nobles. I would not have come back either. This city is cursed,” she said and spit on the stone ground. “It should be left to rot.”

“Would be an interesting training arena,” Willa mused as she followed Phoebe.

Their team leader looked around before she headed for a building on the large plaza. The few present people seemed like adventurers, perhaps former soldiers. None were above level one hundred, likely local to places that offered little work for them now.

One large man with three scars on his shaved skull growled at their group as they passed. He sat on a stone slab and twirled a knife in his hand.

“What the fuck are you growling for?” Willa spat, taking a few steps towards him and away from their group. “Go do something useful, you shit.”

[Rogue Bruiser – lvl 89]

The man shook his head before he spat to the ground. He looked at Phoebe. “Not going to rein in your bitch?”

“Why would I do that? You growled at us. And now you called her a bitch,” Phoebe said. “Not the smartest move, I’ll be honest.”

“I know the guard,” he said. “You have no authority here.”

Willa appeared in front of him and smiled. “I think you’re full of shit.”

He locked eyes with her, shaking his head a moment later. The man stood up, still looking at her before he started to walk away. “You’re not welcome here.”

Three others sitting nearby stood up and left with him.

“Cursed city,” Mila said when they were gone.

“That looks like the adventuring guild,” Phoebe said and pointed.

“Oh, that’s going to be a sorry lot,” Willa murmured.

“Lots of boulder clearing jobs probably,” Ember said.

“And who would pay for that?” Phoebe asked. “We’re not here to get a job anyway.”

“We could get jobs too if they’re easy. We could help out And make some silver,” Willa said.

“Not the worst suggestion you ever offered,” Phoebe said, the squad making their way to one of the larger structures bordering the stone plaza, a three story stone building with a flat roof and broad windows that looked mostly undamaged. It lacked any colors, much like the rest of the downright dilapidated city.

“To adventure,” Willa mused, mimicking the voice of Celeste, the Sentinel well known for her enthusiasm to find and fight new monsters.

“Until we surpass Lilith?” Ember asked in a teasing voice.

“Yes,” Willa answered and smirked. “Exactly.”