

“The first gates are set up,” Ilea said to Claire.

“Wonderful. We’ll send representatives to the three cities immediately,” the woman answered. “Do you have time for another flight?”

“Depends where,” Ilea said.

“The Pit. Bralin helped us with the communication and already suggested various trade agreements. He’s surprisingly knowledgeable about the town’s resources for a mere mechanic,” she said.

“Hah, yeah. I suppose he is,” Ilea mused. “I’ll deliver the letter to their current Champion. I’ll make sure we can get there faster as well.”

“If that’s a possibility. We didn’t plan to involve them for another week but the faster we can get everything rolling, the better,” Claire said with a smile. “Everyone is excited. I also drafted something for the Empress, that’s less of a priority though. With their resources, they’ll be ready in a few hours at most.”

“Ready to receive a gate of their own?” Ilea asked.

“Indeed. Their use is impossible without the tuned keys of course, and I’d like to have a guard or two present to make sure they don’t already take it apart,” she said.

“Well, they have a Fae... so I wouldn’t be too sure they can’t figure it out,” Ilea mused.

*“That’s why we bought up the entire stock of several rarely used metals. Even if they happen to have a few of them stored, it would take them years to set up their own network. And I would imagine they’d start with their own Empire and Baralia. A plan for such is already offered in the letter, with us providing the gates of course. I doubt the Empress would refuse, not after what you told me about your meeting... and subsequent spar,”* Claire said with a slight smirk.

“Didn’t expect you to move so quickly with them,” Ilea said.

Claire shrugged. *“A half elf and a Fae change things considerably. We might not think much of those secrets but the Empress knows what kind of damage their revelation could cause within their nobility. As does our own Council.”*

“I do hope you’re not threatening them,” Ilea said as she received the communication.

*“Not at all. But I can’t remove the unspoken implication. The mere fact that you found those secrets gives us a lot of leeway when dealing with Lys. I’m very grateful for that, even if Alyris has been very accommodating so far. Our dealings should be even more smooth now, and I’ll make sure to play fair,”* Claire answered.

“Make sure you do. Wouldn’t want to see you turn into another powerhungry ruler,” Ilea said with a smile.

*“Right hand you mean. Of the powerhungry ruler I decided to serve. The Meadow that is,”* Claire said.

“I see it’s infecting everyone’s minds already,” Ilea mused.

“Well I’m sure you had nothing to do with its behavior,” Claire answered.

“And you’re even blaming me. What has the world come to,” Ilea said. “I’ll go deliver your letters.”

The flight to the Pit was rather quick from the starting point of Riverwatch, the settlement considerably closer to the Naraza mountain chain than Hallowfort. Ilea stopped just above the entrance and summoned her war machine. Its weight pulled her down until she impacted with a majestic boom. Her own weight certainly didn’t have anything to do with it. It was all the machine.

Spells were readied as the dust settled, her booming voice resounding through the crevice. “I’m back.”

Cheers came from the poor sods burdened with guard duty, the gate opened immediately upon her declaration.

Ilea made her way inside and down to the settlement, training her boost chambers in her legs to get down to the entrance. Her head caught on the ceiling with the first try, her entire form flipping once before she impacted the ground with a heavy strike. Getting up was a task in itself but she managed thanks to the boosters and her space manipulation. The next try went better but she still fell another four times until she arrived, covered in dust and debris, the guards with weapons drawn and their war machines at the ready.

“Welcome, Lilith,” one of them said as he checked behind her. “Did a monster get inside?”

“Just me,” she answered with her deep voice. “I’d like to meet the Champion.”

“Aren’t... you, technically the Champion?” the other guard asked.

“No. I’m most certainly not,” Ilea answered. She didn’t want a ruling position. Not here, not anywhere. A veto right perhaps, at most. Just to make sure nobody would suddenly declare fascism or slavery a fun new trend.

“Please enter, we will inform the Champion of your arrival,” the first guard said and stepped inside.

Ilea followed and waited near the entrance, the view of the entire town still quite impressive. She set one of her gate marks. *Just the one left, and I need it to connect to the others.* She could remove the one in Riverwatch or the one at the edge of the Meadow’s domain at any time but for now she didn’t see a reason to do so.

It didn’t take long for Helwart to arrive personally, his large war machine landing near her. He tapped his helmet.

“Scared someone might listen?” she asked.

“Yer back earlier than I thought, Lilith. Gossip spreads faster in this town than a wildfire down in yer human lands,” he spoke. “You wish to stay or is it something urgent?”

“I bring news from the Meadow Accords. I did mention a potential alliance,” she said and summoned the letter, teleporting the thing into his large metal hand.

The dwarf made it vanish.

*His armor counts as his body?* Ilea wondered. That's at least how most storage items worked and she hadn't detected any active space magic.

*"Hmm. Yes. This is workable. We would like to meet these Councils. I'll need a day to convince the proud folks of our proud former prison,"* the dwarf said. *"Do you wish to stay? I'm sure your journey was long."*

*"I'm fine,"* Ilea said. *"I'll be back in a day."*

*"Wonderful. Also... a working teleportation gate will be more convincing than anything I can present,"* he added.

*"I think seeing the Meadow and our allies will do the trick just fine,"* Ilea said with a smile. *"Until tomorrow, Helwart."*

She made her war machine vanish and stepped through a thin fissure, vanishing from the Pit.

*"Madwoman,"* the dwarf sent just before the fissure closed.

*"That's one of them,"* Ilea mused, stretching as she walked towards the soul forge. *Riverwatch is probably the closest to Virilya. Until the gates are active that is. All that saved time.* She watched the people work, walls and buildings added to the domain of the Meadow. Paved roads now led down towards the Descent and up towards Hallowfort, a large defensible building now located where the gate to Morhill had been placed. *"I hope you declared the borders. Wouldn't want you to feel cramped in your own home."*

*"Physical space is hardly a concern, Ilea,"* the Meadow replied.

*"Good. But still, make sure you don't let them walk all over you,"* she said.

*"Not all of them can fly,"* the being answered in a matter of fact tone.

Ilea smiled and addressed Claire. *"The Champion of the Pit is ready to meet the council in one day. I assume with the most important people in the city."*

*"That's good news. We will be ready to receive them. If a gate is required for them to come, we can provide one,"* Claire answered.

*"No need. I'll get them here myself. You can discuss the gate then,"* Ilea said.

*"Wonderful. Thank you, Ilea,"* the woman said and nodded her way, back to her previous discussion a moment later.

*To Virilya then,* Ilea thought and opened a fissure to the depths of Karth. The mark reset, she continued to Riverwatch, doing the same there.

The flight to Virilya turned out uneventful. She didn't even land near the gates but simply flew past the wall, her path intercepted by a group of flying guards.

*"Welcome, Sentinel. May we see your badge?"* the leader said, a respectful distance between his form and hers. The other guards stayed near him, their posture not suggesting aggression.

Ilea summoned the small winged badge and threw it his way. *No longer immediately Lilith,* she mused. Even with her mantle and wings. *Doing a wonderful job, my little healers. I've got to visit them again to train a little... show my appreciation.* She noted that one of the guards tensed up a little. *Did that get through... how very perceptive,* she thought, watching the woman squirm a little.

“That’s alright. Welcome to Virilya, Sentinel. Do contact the guard if there is anything you need,” the leader said and threw the badge back.

Ilea caught the thing and made it vanish. *More respectful than they are to the Shadow’s Hand. Curious.* She wondered how much of that had to do with her very recent battle below the central district. “Thank you, captain,” she said with a smile, glancing at the woman to the right. The last word she infused with monster hunter, just for the fun of it. She didn’t stay to watch the frozen guards, though she did note that the leader remained unaffected. *Experienced, that one.*

He had been just above level two hundred, which meant he had faced quite a slew of high level creatures. *Maybe the others just got a level or two as well.*

**‘ding’ ‘Monstrous reaches lvl 12’**

**‘ding’ ‘Sage of Torment reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18’**

*Oh come on, how is this torture? You should see the Sentinel headquarters.*

She deactivated her mantle and landed near the Halls of Eternity. Others did the same as she arrived, walking the rest of the way to their destinations. She simply waited, her arms crossed.

Heron stepped next to her a moment later.

“You’re still invisible,” she noted.

“One small win for the Immortal Guard,” he mused. “What brings you back so soon?”

“You sound thrilled to see me,” Ilea said and summoned the letter.

He received it and made it vanish. “You work fast.”

“Long range teleportation,” she sent with a grin. “I’ll be back in a day, for whatever correspondence you’ll have.”

“We appreciate it,” Heron said. “A safe journey to you.”

“That’s the opposite of what I want. I’ll see you around,” Ilea mused and spread her wings, a few people nearby glancing their way.

Heron vanished as she ascended. A few minutes of flight brought her out into the wilderness, far enough away from the city to be sure nobody was around. Ilea landed in a clearing, sitting down on a large rock that overlooked a nearby pond. A breeze moved through her hair, the suns shining down on her. *About noon, I suppose.*

*“Esteemed librarian of the Shadow’s Hand, Dagon Keywire*

*I have been informed that you have inquired about an individual named Scipio. I would like to invite you to discuss his whereabouts in person.*

*Regards,  
Evan Trayne”*

She read through the letter. *It’s been a while. I wonder if this invitation is even still valid. It’s not exactly for me either.* She summoned her notebook and put the letter inside, flipping pages until she got to a rough map of the known human lands. The Foundation was marked at the very bottom, in the middle of the Isanna desert. *Let’s see what that place is all about, and if they really have a key.*

Ilea spread her wings and charged them. The flight would take a few hours, even at her speed. She stored her notebook and shot off into the distance. The desert itself she would find with ease. And if the Foundation had a key, she'd have no trouble finding it too.

When she crossed over the last mountain chain of Kroll, Ilea summoned her locator. She floated in the air and watched the arrow move. It stopped aiming towards the south, the middle of the desert.

*I'm glad I don't have to make that journey on foot*, Ilea thought. She looked up, straight into one of the two suns. Her irises resisted the damage its light would've dealt to a weaker human. *Or without Heat and Light Resistances*. She smiled and once more charged her wings.

A moment later she was gone.

Ilea stopped every half hour to check the locator. The dunes looked endless and unforgiving, even with her enhanced sight. An occasional outcrop of mountains showed in the distance, barely recognizable in the heated air. A few hours later, she found the arrow pointing eastward. *I passed it*. She checked the angle and flew off, soon making out a group of high reaching mountains in the distance. Five in total, one reaching perhaps a kilometer in height. She slowed down and circled around the distant landmark, her locator confirming that the key was there.

*Splendid*, she thought. A glance down revealed the top bit of a monster vanishing back into the sand. *Aw, didn't want to come take a bite?* She descended a little and landed in the sand, hoping the creature would show up but it seemed the thing could tell she wouldn't be easy pickings.

*This place should be pretty fucking hard to find, let alone get to. And yet it's well known within the human Plains*. She flew low over the dunes, stopping a few kilometers away from the walled off valley entrance. *Are those palm trees?* She squinted her eyes and indeed saw lush green colors between the rocky exterior. *An oasis armored by literal mountains*. She twitched a few dozen meters later, ready to dodge an attack when she realized what she saw was the reflection of the suns. *No neighbors to complain about it I suppose*. She wondered if this was the way to find the Foundation in the first place.

Her approach was stopped a few hundred meters before the wall, a group of sand mages approaching through the desert as if on skies. They formed a half circle about twenty meters away from her, all wearing bone armor, all of them masked.

### ***[Guardian of Truth – lvl 229]***

They all had similar Classes. Specialized it seemed to the Foundation.

One of them signed to another, the latter rushing back to the mountains. The first approached on foot, her demeanor casual. She took off her mask to reveal bronze skin and green eyes. Three distinct scars were visible on her cheek, black hair going down her back. She stopped a few meters in front of Ilea and bowed. "Greetings. Lilith of Ravenhall. Welcome, to the Foundation of Glass."

"Nice to meet you," Ilea said, a glance to the fast moving guard that had left.

"To announce your arrival. Our walls are open to all, but for an individual such as yourself, we may make arrangements. May I ask the purpose of your visit?" the woman said.

"Sure. I wanted to meet Evan Trayne. We received an invitation some time ago in relation to some... inquiries. Perhaps he would be inclined to meet me instead?" Ilea said and summoned the invitation.

The woman approached. "I will not read what is within. That I swear."

“No need to swear on it,” Ilea said and handed over the letter.

The woman gestured for another and handed him the thing. She signed something with her hands and the man rushed off. “May we escort you to the Foundation? I will inform you as soon as we know more about the status of your invitation.”

*The pleasures and problems with being famous.* Ilea would’ve liked to explore the place in her own pace. She’d be closer to her actual goal here with the help of these bone armored sand mages but it just sucked the fun out of it. “Can I just go in myself? I’d much rather explore a little. I’m sure you’ll find me once you have any news.”

The woman looked at her for a few seconds before she bowed. “As you wish, Lady Lilith.” She signed something to the others and they left. And that was that.

“Oh,” Ilea mused, now once more standing alone in the desert. *They actually respected it.* She grinned and spread her wings. This time she didn’t charge them and instead leisurely flew the rest of the distance. The mountains to each side of the valley were dark and jagged, high reaching like the tower peaks of Victorian architecture. The sands ended just in front of the twenty meter high walls of stone. If she hadn’t seen what lay beyond, she would’ve thought it an abandoned dam.

The gates were slightly ajar, a group of level two hundred guards in bone armor standing nearby. Three of them had set up a table and were playing cards, two more engaged in a heated debate, speaking a language Ilea didn’t understand. It all seemed rather lax. Her dominion revealed their tension, each one of them ready to jump up at a moment’s notice, each glancing at her when she didn’t look their way. They didn’t fake their card game, nor was the debate made up. What she gathered from the scene was experience beyond anything she had seen with human city guards. They reminded her more of Shadows or high level adventurers.

Beyond the gate, the heat immediately dropped. It hadn’t bothered her, but then again she enjoyed lava baths. A paved road led up to a long stairwell, steep mountain walls going up on each side. Ilea noticed more than a few enchantments, both in the wall and beyond. *Claire would be proud,* she mused and started walking up the stairs.

She reached the top a few minutes later and found an expansive space between the high reaching mountains. Trees of various species stood between meadows lush with flowers. Creeks rolled down through the landscape, forming into a lake to her right. Birds, frogs, and fish moved in the waters, a few water mages meditating near the scene with spheres of liquid floating near their sitting forms. Buildings made of stone, sand, and wood stood interspersed within the landscape, the trees growing more dense to her left, houses made of wood set between the highest trunks.

Stairs led up to where she had seen the bright reflection, monuments of glass visible despite the steep angle. Symbols she didn’t recognize. She took in a deep breath and smiled, the air clear and warm. She looked around and aimed for a stand. *Now to try the local foods.*