

Evan slowly stood up and made his weapon vanish. “You let my blade pierce but ignore its magic, my sand cannot catch you, your armor regrows faster than I can damage it. Even heavy impacts show no reaction, you are more durable than most monsters I have fought. And your bone... withstands my magic. I expected you to be powerful, Lilith, but that bit in the reports about your resistance training... I had taken it for a past time. Not a calling.”

Ilea smiled, her face revealed as well. “I do enjoy it quite a bit. Sadly the only thing I can get from you is soul magic resistance. At the moment that is.”

He can't beat me. Shit is, the same is true for me. Dodges my spells and survives my fires. Plus in the end he can just hide again. His blade even got rid of my mark on him. Maybe if he didn't have a healing spell himself but like this it's just a battle of attrition. She trusted herself in that kind of battle but his soul blade gave her pause. She could teleport him away continuously but that would just prolong the fight and he would hide again. The only reason she got in hits was because he fought extremely aggressive. And everyone else he would just shred apart. Suppose the same is true again for me.

“Ah... you are exciting. Frustrating too, but it's been a while, since a battle was quite as difficult,” he said. “I do not believe there will be a victor soon.”

Ilea smiled and looked up at the suns. “Yeah. I don't think so either. But I don't much care.”

His bone mask reformed over a broad grin, the sand under him spreading out once more. “Me neither.”

White flame covered a stretch of several kilometers of sand in a remote part of the Isanna desert. Onlookers might think it the result of a monster's hunt or the battle of ancient predators. A good eye would reveal a single table made of bone, standing amidst the lingering fires. Two chairs, one of bone, and one of ash, stood with two people sitting down.

Evan poured two cups, setting down the kettle with a steady hand. He once again wore his robes, sitting opposite an ash covered Lilith. Her face was revealed.

“Thank you,” she spoke and received the cup, taking a sip before she sighed.

“I like to brew it fresh,” the man said. He looked at the brew with considerable suspicion before he took a sip.

“Storage items keep it at the same temperature,” Ilea said. “Well, most do.”

“That's what I don't quite believe,” Evan said. “Or perhaps it's the act of brewing that I feel adds to the taste.”

Ilea raised her cup. “That I understand. Something about making things yourself. I'm not exactly the best cook or brewer though so I prefer to consume what others make.”

“You are young still. Plenty of time to gain expertise in whatever skills you may find an interest in. Not to the extent of a high level specialist but... close enough,” he said. “If that is, you continue to survive, and stop at some point.”

“Stop the fighting? I don’t know. Sounds boring,” Ilea answered.

“Well, either you die, or you run out of things to fight. Things that provide a challenge that is,” he said.

“Don’t talk about such a nightmare scenario,” she said. *But I suppose I’d have to get another hobby if that turns out to be the case. Dancing seems alright. Maybe an instrument? Lilith, the legendary rock star.*

“The suns will soon set. I will have to return to my affairs, and I assume the same is true for you,” Evan said with his eyes on the horizon.

Ilea sighed. “I wish you were wrong. But there are indeed things to do. Would you mind sparring again? I don’t have a training partner that could prepare me for humanoid sapient in the fourth tier.”

“You plan to face such beings in the near future?” the man asked, taking a sip from his tea.

“One never really knows,” Ilea answered as she stood up.

“I enjoyed our fight. I could offer you a few hours per week. Though I understand if the journey is not worth your time,” Evan said.

Ilea moved her fifth transfer mark to their current location. “That won’t be a problem.”

“I suppose a space mage would not need teleportation gates to move long distances,” the man said.

“Surprised?” she asked.

“No. It’s not unheard of, though near always extremely restricted. I would imagine such is not the case with you. Or not anymore,” Evan said.

“Speculations,” Ilea said with a smile. She stood up and stretched. “I’ll be there in a week or so.”

The man raised his cup. “Do not lose yourself in the dark.”

“I don’t need light to see,” Ilea said and opened a gate to Riverwatch. “It was good meeting you.”

The man gave her a nod. “Ilea.”

“Evan,” she said and stepped through the slightly shimmering space, closing the gate right after. *Could use him to dump half a desert through a gate if I ever need one. Hey I can do that with water too. Pressure from the bottom of the ocean? Wait no... don’t want to open a gate to that hellzone.*

She stood on the hill for a moment. *Lava is too slow. Arcane storms are unreliable. Would gravity even apply? Or just momentum? A river could work but that’s not exactly going to be more than a shower. One with lots of water but if I want to kill level monsters I can do that with ash.*

Either way she deemed the Meadow a more effective option. Magically enhanced elements were stronger anyway.

“What now. Still have some time until my meetings with Alyris and Helwart,” she murmured and quickly checked through the messages from her extensive battle with the Founder of the Foundation.

'ding' 'Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 13'

'ding' 'Arcane Dominion [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 15'

'ding' 'Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 8'

'ding' 'Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 10'

'ding' 'Mantle of the Titan [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 10'

'ding' 'Tempered Seal [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5'

'ding' 'Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 10'

'ding' 'Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 13'

'ding' 'Embered Form [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5'

'ding' 'Embered Form [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6'

'ding' 'Fires of Creation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Fabric Tear [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 19'

'ding' 'Soul Perception reaches lvl 14'

'ding' 'Soul Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2'

'ding' 'You have survived an earnest battle with the Desert Chosen – One Core skill point awarded'

Survived? What do you mean survived? Just need another hundred levels and that tea enthusiast is toast. That or a thousand years of training... the blade. Ah shit I forgot to show him the hammer. He might've been interested. Well, next time.

Ilea sat down in the grass and changed into comfortable clothes, summoning a meal as she watched the suns go down over Riverwatch. She could see the teleportation gate building in the distance, an entire company of guards standing around with various mages putting additions and walls up against monsters or other attackers.

Way to paint a target, she thought but didn't really mind. If this was how Riverwatch decided to go about their first gate, that was that. I wouldn't even have questioned the existence of teleportation gates if they had been here upon my arrival. With magic being real.

She finished and summoned her key locator. The arrow spun before it focused northwards. *North I can do*, Ilea thought and stood up. She teleported towards the clouds a few times before she spread her wings and charged them.

She flew until the Naraza mountain chain became visible in the distance. Storm clouds hung over the edges, lightning flashing from time to time as the lone winged figure closed in on the landmark that spanned beyond the entire length of the human Plains. The arrow turned. Westward but still towards the mountains.

Interesting. Closer than I expected. She entered the storm about twenty minutes later, wind and rain clashing against her mantle. Ilea followed the many mountain tops lining the spine like barrier to the North. She slowed down in an empty valley, kilometers of nothing in each direction. Patches of wild grass grew where she landed, white flowers clinging to life in the harsh climate. Snow still covered the mountain tops she could see. She had left behind most of the storm clouds but it still rained lightly at the lower altitude.

A strong gust moved through the valley, the rain turned sideways and near frozen. *Thank fuck for resistances and magic armor.* She looked at the locator and found it pointed towards a small hill a few hundred meters away. *Might as well check it out while I'm here.*

The walk was brief and she soon came up on a strange field of magic. Barely noticeable and certainly not something she would've registered if the locator hadn't brought her here. She put her arm through the field. The gesture caused no reaction, so she walked through.

At the top of the hill now stood a decrepit building that looked a little like a monastery, long stone walls lined with windows, a single broad door at the front. A statue stood at the top and back of the structure, winged and holding a sword. Any color the entire thing might've once been covered in had long faded, a single green flag fluttered in the wind, connected to a small pole above the entrance.

Doesn't look like the dwellings of a Dragon, Ascended, or a Monarch.

Ilea paused when she saw the three swords sticking out of the ground to the side of the hill, helmets placed on top. All were faded and entirely consumed by rust. Though she didn't miss the dull green color. *Let's see if someone's home.* She walked up the slope and arrived at the door. Her dominion picked up a few peculiar things inside. She knocked. It had no effect on the one sleeping resident. Instead she opened the door and peered inside. "Hello?"

The hall was rather dark, a few magical lights giving the chairs and tables a green hue. Rusted piles of metal lay in various corners and to one side of the structure, only experience letting Ilea identify them as Taleen Guardians. A pot sat atop an assortment of runed plates at the back, the entire hall quite a bit warmer than outside. Behind the largest table sat a single dwarf. Broad shoulders, an enormous black beard with gray strewn within, a dark green metal helmet. A sword lay on the table next to a mug. He looked heavy.

[Paladin – lvl 240]

To his left stood a Centurion, missing two of its legs. A large dent showed on its head, much of its body sporting scratches and dents from long past battles. Compared to the destroyed machines it had no rust on it, one of its eyes dark with the other occasionally flickering. It propped up its body with the butt of its spear, taking a shuffling step forward when it spotted the visitor.

[Taleen Centurion – lvl 323]

Highest level base Centurion I've seen? Ilea wondered and waved carefully. Neither of them seemed quite up for a fight. She turned her head to one of the piles, realizing it wasn't just a bunch of scrap.

Two green eyes stared back as a rust covered arm raised a spear.

[Taleen Centurion – lvl 327]

It threw the spear in a slow arc, missing Ilea by about four meters. The metal weapon clattered to the ground before it rolled around and hit a table leg.

“W... what is it,” a deep voice asked, the dwarf coughing a few times before he looked up with slightly dulled black eyes. He squinted before he touched a nearby magical lamp, the light intensifying. He scrambled up when he saw the intruder, sword in hand as the chair behind him clattered to the ground. “Elf! You stand on holy ground. Prepare yourself!”

Ilea revealed her face and gestured with both hands. “Calm down Paladin, I’m not here to fight. And I’m not an elf.”

He jumped over the table, the movement somewhat less impressive than it might’ve been a few hundred years ago. He pointed his blade. “Elves lie,” he spoke as the Centurion behind him advanced, using its spear as a crutch.

Ilea sighed lightly. She bit her lip and thought for a second. Then she summoned a small barrel of Walter’s ale. “Would an elf share ale with their host?”

The dwarf squinted at her but the question gave him pause.

She didn’t wait for a response and simply walked past him, her mantle gone as she sat down. There was no threat here. She cracked open the barrel and summoned two mugs, filling both before she started drinking. “When’s the last time you had anything reasonable to eat? Your stew smells... bland.”

He watched her and considered. “A human ye say? Yer not one of them Azerith healers are ye? Them teleportin nut jobs.”

“I’m not,” Ilea said. “They’re not around anymore anyway.”

He sighed. “Good to hear. See I don’t trust ye, but ale... and food... if ye have any?”

Ilea summoned a few meals. “Got plenty more too. Your Centurions don’t look particularly well. I assume you can’t do maintenance up here?”

He opened his mouth to say something when the smell reached him. Something in his eyes changed and he advanced, sat down, and started eating without a word.

Ilea was sure she heard a few sobs as he wolfed down three plates of restaurant food. She didn’t want to ruin his expectations with Keyla’s creations.

He sighed and leaned back, looked at her, then grabbed the mug and downed it in one go. “Good. Thank ye. A stranger comes at a last. Not what I had hoped for but here we are. Maintenance... yes. It has been... a few years? They’re hanging in there. I’m not a Builder ye see... no... I cannae share this with an outsider.”

“What makes you think I’m an outsider?” Ilea asked and showed her necklace. She summoned the Tungsten Key and set it down on the table. “I’m a key warden, and here to collect yours.”

He glanced at the necklace and then the artifact. “What’s that?”

“You... don’t know what this is?” Ilea asked. She blinked her eyes a few times and looked to the Centurion for confirmation. Its one green eye stared back.

He thought for a moment before he squinted with one eye. "It looks like... reminds me of a thing in the cellar. I think. Strange shape." He scratched his head and leaned back, now taking off his helmet. "Yer with the Makers then? Necklace like that only belongs to them, though never thought they'd take in a human."

Ilea found the key down in the cellar, inside a crate of scraps and tools. For now she was more interested in the dwarf however.

"It's classified. But because I know you did a good job here... they trained some humans as a special operation team to infiltrate their ranks. Thanks to us we managed to destroy the Azerith Order," Ilea said.

He pointed at her. "That. I did. It's Azorinth." He paused. "I think." The dwarf looked at her with some clarity returning to his eyes. "What year is it?"

"When did you arrive here?" Ilea asked.

He considered but then shook his head. An awkward laugh. "Don't know. Spose I've grown old. By Henel."

"What's your name?" Ilea asked. "I'm Ilea."

"Ilea... what an unusual name for a human. I am Gretmoor Valarian of the Guards, Paladin of Henel and guardian of this sanctuary. Did ye bring a Builder? Or reinforcements? Me group has suffered casualties... a long time ago. Foul Hunter over there did two of em in," he said and pointed to a large drake like skull hanging from an improvised hook at the back of the hall. "Buried em. Guardians didn't make it. Twas a glorious battle." He didn't sound quite convinced.

Ilea listened and refilled both her and his cup. "What happened to the third? I saw three graves."

He refocused and took the cup with a thankful nod. "The third... Mart, ye. May he fight on!" he raised his cup.

Ilea did the same. "May he fight on."

Gretmoor grew quiet for a moment before he looked up. "Machine related accident."

"What happened?" Ilea asked.

He downed his cup. "As I said. Accident, with the machines."

"I see," Ilea said. "Sounds... bad."

"Twas," he murmured.

"So you were stationed here to guard this sanctuary? A holy site to Henel?" Ilea asked.

"Aye, such were me orders. Haven't heard anything since," Gretmoor said.

Now that's a paladin. He must've been here for... millennia. How is that even possible. "What do you do all day? Are there many attackers... or faithful... visiting?"

"Nay. Henel was never quite popular. Makers donae believe in the gods, and youth these days rather look to Praetorians for guidance," he said and laughed. "No faithful here... besides meself, and me two Centurions. Few attacks too. Harsh climate, and I keep the enchantments working. Got some... maintenance manual somewhere. Hunting mice, hare, occasional birds. Tis a quiet life, but I've come to like it."

Ilea smiled. She couldn't help but like the guy. An artifact from a long past age, perhaps a little mad. His continued loyalty was both sad and inspiring, the former only because it seemed his people had abandoned him. That or it was incredibly unfortunate timing. The sheer fact that he survived all this time was downright insane. *Guess that speaks for the life span of a level two forty dwarf.* She didn't doubt there were people capable of living alone in the mountains but his lack of social interaction most certainly showed. "Gretmoor. When was the last time you went on a vacation?"

"Can't leave me post," he said. "Not an option."

"What if a Pursuer takes over for a little while?" she asked with a grin.

"What's a Pursuer?" he asked.

"Newest tech. Stronger than even a Praetorian," Ilea whispered.

He paused and looked at her with some suspicion. "Stronger than a Praetorian ye say?"