

Ilea stepped back when the Elves started tearing open the ground, some of them hissing at each other. She assumed they were arguing about who got to go first. *That nice railing. And it's gone.*

She watched the masked elf move closer to her whilst everyone else either stepped away from the entrance or tore away the stone. The elf downright moved on all fours as he got closer, looking up at her before he straightened.

[Wood Mage – lvl ???]

She gauged him to be close to eight hundred but not quite there. He had a strange feel about him. “Hi,” she sent, establishing a connection. Somehow she felt like it was the right approach.

He tilted his head to the side, his hands raised before he clapped once and hissed. A hiss like nothing she had heard before. It sounded, joyous in a way. Not only amused but happy.

“Hi,” he sent back and giggled. *“Human. Healer. Lilith. Space mage. Why ash?”*

“Why not?” she asked.

He recoiled, taking several steps back as he went back into a crouch. He raised a hand to his masked face and looked down to the ground. *“Why not...”*

“Why wood?” Ilea asked in turn, getting his attention back.

“Wood. It's everywhere, all around. Not here, deep below, but some roots reach far,” he said as he twirled, roots sprouting from his hands with leaves and flowers growing out in various shades and hues, a few even glowing to illuminate his form.

The first heavy hitting magic reverberated through the hall, the entire structure vibrating slightly as the more eager elves started their attempts to break through the barrier.

Ilea didn't like their chances but she would have her go as well. Until then she wanted to learn more about the strange elf.

“You're wasting your time, human,” Veratin commented as he walked by.

She assumed the fire mage wanted to have a go at the barrier as well, his magic downright palpable.

Envious about my attention, are we? She wasn't sure. Either he was interested in her or he just had a lot of disdain for the wood mage. He would certainly not be strong enough to challenge the crouching bird elf. Few here would be, herself included. Maybe.

“What's your name? I'm Lilith,” she said.

“Names. I am known as Naradan. But I am the one who moves through the forest. The one who breaths the air of life. I am the hunter, and I am the hunted. Who are you?” the elf answered, glancing at her as he leaned forward in anticipation.

“Interesting... hmm... I am known as Lilith. The one who fights. The one who heals. I am a Sentinel. Free and flying, a being of ash and embers,” she said. It could use some work but she felt it was close enough.

The elf giggled. It was a strange sound coming from an elf in the first place. He bowed in an exaggerated manner. *“Thank you, Lilith. For introductions.”*

“The same to you, Naradan,” she said with a smile. More explosions resounded, bits and pieces of stone flying through the hall now as dust fell from the ceiling. One nearby hunter slapped away a falling chunk of rock.

The wood mage glanced around before he vanished, appearing near the ceiling. Roots grew from his legs as he watched the Hunters below whilst upside down.

“I like that one,” she sent to Kyrian.

“Did he want to eat you?” Zorithanael asked, looking up at the wood elf before he glanced at her, silver eyes taking her in.

“Who knows?” Ilea mused, forming an ashen chair to join the group. She heard the familiar roar of Feyrair’s dragon form and glanced over, seeing him breathe in, a torrent of flames rushing down into the bright barrier a moment later.

“Who knows indeed,” Zori said, watching the dragonling as well. *“The flame of creation. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”*

Ilea smiled. *“It is.”*

Kyrian chuckled from behind them, his arms crossed, still covered in metal.

Ilea hadn’t removed her mantle either. It just felt right to be armored around so many unknown elves. Beings most humans would consider monsters. Some of them seemed close enough. She wondered what would’ve happened if she found this room at level one hundred. Would they have killed her? Just for being a human? Or for being too weak? After her short delve into the Still Valley, she really felt like some of the elves acted purely on instinct, or just on a whim, their moods more important than reason. Was it just due to their education? Or was it really their nature?

What would humans do if they just lived in a wasteland of ice trees? No need for food either really, just hunting for fun when prey comes wandering in, or perhaps going out on some fun adventures. She had compared young elves to children or teenagers before but maybe her perspective wasn’t exactly right. *“Which domain are you from, Zorithanael?”*

The elf glanced at her, a wave of sound magic lashing out at a one meter broad chunk of rock that came his way, stopping the thing in its tracks entirely. It fell to the ground with a heavy impact.

“The Domain of Dark, young human. In the western mountains of Vannok. I have not been there in... a long time,” he sent. *“Where do you hail from, Wanderer?”*

“Domain of Dark. Caverns I assume?” she sent. *“I’m not from this realm.”*

“A wanderer indeed,” he said with a toothy smirk. *“By choice?”*

Ilea shook her head.

“A rare thing either way. It is fortunate that you have found your way in these strange lands. My former home... yes. It was warm. Dark. Quiet. I feel comfortable in the depths. I did not see sunlight until after I had joined the Hunters,” he spoke.

“How did you even learn about them?” Ilea asked.

“There are those of us who learn. Those of us who talk. First you share stories. Perhaps you learn to write from someone else. Gifts exchanged. An Oracle might take interest or pity, may teach you of the world, of sunlight, the sea, the northern storms. I have learned from ancient kin. Perhaps you have seen the raging fires of the eastern Wastes, the metal armies of unfeeling machines moving through the Navali forest on their hunt for elven kind, but as they move on the surface, they move below. Thousands, from caverns, cliffs, and cracks they come. To hunt. Unending in numbers and unwavering in their purpose,” he spoke.

“Did you meet many Oracles?” Ilea asked.

He paused, looking at her for a while. *“What about you?”*

Ilea smiled. *“Only one. Recently.”*

“Did you speak?” he asked.

“Yes. We... exchanged gifts, I suppose.”

He smiled. *“Indeed. You are quite strange. Yes. I have met a few in my time, though all of my domain. They live in the darkness, deep below the earth. The very magic around you feels... alive, when they are present. I myself have felt... insignificant. Perhaps due to my nature. Have you felt the same?”*

Ilea thought about it for a while, watching bright fires explode down into the barrier, half the hall gone again now that the elves were trying to break through. Hissing and taunting comments had already faded into background noise for her.

“She was certainly powerful. A being of magic... very strange, and ancient. But I felt similar with the Elementals I have encountered. I think it’s just a matter of pure magical prowess,” she said.

“Elementals... yes. The few I have seen were, more a natural force. Though with Oracles there is more intent. A being of thought,” he said.

“Maybe. But you know... when I first encountered elves, I was barely level fifty. They were monsters to me. Everyone around me ran for their lives. We could barely escape one, even in a group of fifty. And you are beings of thought as well,” she said.

“I... am sorry. That you have suffered at the hands of our kind. You call us beings of thought, but I sometimes question that statement,” he said and gestured to the hissing mages sending spells against each other and the barrier.

“Don’t overestimate the average human,” Ilea said with a grin.

“In which domain did you meet an Oracle? Or did you see one in the northern marshes?” he asked.

“The Still Valley,” Ilea said.

He hissed, amused at her answer. *“I knew one could escape. Even more amusing that it’s a human. No offense.”*

“None taken. I thought the same when I heard about it. But it’s dangerous. Space magic and teleportation in general is barely usable down there. And the Oracle’s ice magic affected me despite third tier resistances and a shit ton of healing, heat, and regeneration,” she said.

“Yes. They are powerful beings. As are you, though I know of no human who has reached such levels. You may very well be stronger than I,” Zori said.

"We could test that," Ilea said with a smile.

"And I am to live in shame after demonstrating my inferiority to everyone present? No. There is enough talk about me as it is," he said with a smile. *"Besides. We are here for a purpose, despite the downright bestial performance of my kin and fellow Hunters."*

"Right," Ilea said. She wasn't particularly disappointed. They could have a bout whenever. And she's fought higher leveled elves. The one she wanted to fight wasn't in this hall after all. *"You mentioned marshes? That's not a Domain I've heard of."*

He rested his head on his right hand, watching the magic spectacle at the center of the hall. *"Because it isn't one. The marshes span far into the west. South of the Frozen Wasteland and west even of the Mountains of Vannok. Once home to the Druned, monsters now roam those treacherous lands. It is said that ancient Oracles have wandered into the northern marshes. It is said that they remain there, to this day. Beings perhaps, who have lost their wits. Some suggest it is exile of sorts, most do not speak of it at all."*

"Have you been there? Seen one?" Ilea asked.

He smiled, the expression wistful in a way. Tired. *"I have shared a lot with you, Lilith. You are more interesting than I dared hope. But this, shall remain with me."*

"I understand," Ilea said. *So he did go there, and then had a tragic romance with an ancient Oracle.* She nodded to herself.

"Whatever conclusion you have come to, I assure you, it's wrong," he sent.

"Certainly," Ilea said, summoning another bottle of ale as she momentarily shifted her attention to the arcane beams that lashed into the golden wall below. *"You've traveled a lot?"*

"May I have one of those drinks? It's been a long while since I tasted it. Ale, beer, or what was it called?" Zori asked.

Ilea summoned another bottle and displaced it in front of him.

He caught it and flicked it open, smelling on it before he took a sip. *"Interesting."*

"Not a fan?" Ilea asked.

"I said, interesting," he repeated.

Ilea glanced over at the wood mage who had appeared again. *"Do you want one too, Naradan?"*

He looked up at the ceiling. *"Yes. A trade, as humans do,"* he said as a large black flower grew from his palm. It had thorns and black leaves, the top looking almost like the maw of a wild beast, though it remained delicate. *"It's you, as a flower."*

"Yes. I got that," Ilea said with a smile, summoning another bottle before she displaced it towards the elf.

He giggled and took the thing, the flower floating towards her in turn.

"Thank you," she said.

He was already gone, now stuck to the wall at a ninety degree angle.

"He is quite peculiar, even for our standards," Zori said. *"I have not offered anything in return for your gift,"* he noted.

“A bout, sometime in the future? Or you could show me an interesting place you found in your travels,” she said.

“Perhaps I will,” Zorithanael spoke. “Though I believe it difficult to impress the Wanderer.”

“I have seen some impressive sights,” she said. “Will you try yourself against the barrier as well?”

He hissed. *“I may consider myself a scholar of sorts, but I am still of elven descent. Of course I will. As will you I presume?”*

“Sure. I have to one up Fey’s weak flame of creation after all,” she said and set alight a flake of ash.

His eyes opened wide before he grinned. *“Yes. Interesting indeed.”*

“Don’t fall for me now,” Ilea sent as she stood up.

“Oh please. You are far, and I have to empathize, far too young for me,” Zori said. “Besides. I do prefer males when it comes to sexuality.”

Ilea smiled as she glanced back. *“I did wonder about Jomraa,” she said, receiving a strange hiss in return. There was annoyance there, and something else. Can’t speak elvish, but I am getting better at interpreting their hisses.* She spread her wings and flew the twenty meters towards the center, a high level elf currently freezing over the visible barrier, others watching, some flying, some on the walls, a few simply standing there. They didn’t seem particularly impressed.

“May I have a go?” Ilea asked, monster hunter enhancing the last word, a few of the elves tensing up slightly. None were frozen. To be expected with experienced fighters.

The ice mage hissed, floating in her way as he formed a lance of ice aimed at the barrier.

Ilea watched as the magic struck down, splintering into a thousand shards without a visible impact. She walked closer, displacing the hissing level five hundred elf. She repeated the spell when he charged at her, the ashen mantle covering her body flaring up with white flame. She enjoyed the reactions, some of the hisses impressed, others annoyed, some downright shocked. Heat formed within her core as she slowly descended towards the golden barrier.

Her weight increased as she felt the heat build, burning ash spreading into the vicinity. The barrier was already covered by her magic. She raised a hand and sacrificed twenty thousand points of health, her fires flaring up with a bright flash before she released Embered Heart. The chaotic beam rushed down and parted the fires and ash, impacting the shield with a thrumming sound. She waited and watched. Ilea found the barrier slightly discolored at the top, the damage repaired in mere split seconds. *Closer.*

Her weight increased more as she floated down. She ignored the Elves and charged up Archon Strike. Her fist slammed down five seconds later, Tempered Seal released at the same moment. Bright turquoise and near orange light flashed up as her spells were sent into the barrier. Burning limbs of ash expanded out of her back before they started thrashing down into the golden light, each releasing Tempered Seal with every single strike. Her left palm aimed downward, Embered Heat released again, her right fist raised and charging Archon Strike.

Powerful magic flared up time and time again as she slowly worked her way into the golden light. Ilea found herself making slight progress when her mana ran out. She watched the slightly darker part of the barrier lighten up again in less than a second as she lessened her weight again and moved her wings.

“A testament to their defenses,” Zori’s voice reached her mind.

She noticed a lot of eyes on her, a few hisses resounding. It was difficult to discern the specific ones.

"I ran out of mana," she sent back, shrugging slightly as she flew past the well dressed elf. She glanced up and teleported next to the upside down Naradan.

"Hot," he said and hissed in an approving manner.

"Yeah, heat is one of my main things," she said. "Will you try too?"

"Wood... is not very good against barriers," the elf answered. "Maybe. Watch."

She glanced down and saw Zori floating above the defensive measure. Runes lit up in the air around him, blue, near purple as they formed a circle. He closed his eyes and pointed downwards. A single note resounded, followed by a wave of pressure. It impacted the barrier with a shock wave emanating through the hall, the very stone shaking at the power. More runes appeared, a second circle forming around the first one. Zori spoke, though his mouth produced no noise. This time the sound was visible. Or rather, the split air, as a pressurized line formed and dug down.

Ilea could see the slight surface level crack, more than what she had managed. *His focus is insane.*

The damage had repaired itself when a third circle of runes had formed in the air. This time the attack wasn't as focused, but far stronger instead. The damage however seemed less. Zori frowned and hissed in an approving manner before he teleported back and away.

"Found your match, hmm?" Ilea sent.

"A most impressive conjuration. I have never seen a barrier this durable," he sent.

"Among the Cursed, a mage of curses walks," Naradan murmured, leaning forward whilst upside down.

Ilea smiled when she saw Kyrian appear near the barrier. His three meter form floated as he raised his arms to the side, a pulse of curse magic flowing through the hall. Cloaks fluttered and the walls shook ever so slightly. A strange whisper came from her friend, though she couldn't say if he produced the sound with his mouth. It felt like a tongue that should not be heard.

A complex glowing rune circle appeared on the ground, ten meters in width. Another glowed ten meters above, floating in the air. Kyrian brought his hands together in a slow motion, his thumbs and index fingers touching. Curse magic broke out in a torrent, the circles connecting as a beam of green light appeared, the hall illuminated for the next five seconds as his spell endured.

The onlookers remained quiet when the magic waned, the barrier repairing itself in mere moments.

"Not bad," she sent to the man who floated up to join them.

"Barely a dent," he sent.

"Well. I'm pretty sure now what's powering this thing," she answered. *"So let's see if we can get a combined effort going."* She smiled, looking for the earth mages who had gone to search for a better spot. *"And if that doesn't work, I'll try to space us through."*