

“Can you build those containment walls again?” Ilea asked.

*“They reduce the range at which I can operate slightly. If it’s acceptable, I will simply add warnings in the vicinity where my mana could be considered troublesome. And I can of course simply move whoever gets too close to protect them. Or smack them with a few rocks if they don’t understand the simple message,”* it explained.

“It’s also a good way to train Arcane Magic Resistance,” Ilea said.

“I doubt many would see that as a benefit,” Catelyn said. “Though I suppose a few might.”

“How far away should we go?” she asked.

*“I will inform you when it should be acceptable for most creatures at level two hundred,”* Meadow said.

“Let’s go then,” Ilea said and put the ball on the ground, waving for Catelyn to follow.

Catelyn gave the Meadow another look, its size reaching about half the height of her small form.

*Let’s see you bloom then,* she thought with apprehension.

They walked away in the long corridor.

“We will get some distance before it expands, the mana could be dangerous,” Catelyn said.

“I shall take this challenge,” Doravin said.

“No you won’t,” Ilea said, the both of them disappearing further away into the corridor.

*She can move Doravin with so little effort. I need to get back to fighting. There’s just been so little time.*

“Are you certain this is the right course of action?” Elana asked.

“Certain?” Catelyn asked, glancing at her as they walked towards the two fighters who were now engaged in combat. “We have welcomed an ancient and powerful creature into our home. There is little certainty to expect with a decision like that. And yet I stand by it, if that is what you’re asking. Do any of you have doubts?”

“Doubts, yes. But I agree. The potential benefits are simply staggering,” Elana said.

“This one agrees,” Varahan said.

“There is little reason for me to oppose,” Haiden said. “If it had been anybody else but Ilea to bring it here. But it was her.”

*She really is the bridge we need. I didn’t expect the council to be as convinced as they are. Especially Elana and No.*

Catelyn glanced at the former Queen.

They soon reached Ilea and the broken Doravin, his armor reforming where it had been dented and penetrated.

“I told you, if you can’t get past me, you won’t survive in its mana,” she said.

“My resistance is in the second tier,” Doravin said.

“Come back when it’s in the third,” Ilea retorted.

“How would that even-” Doravin started, a wave of power interrupting him.

Catelyn braced herself, feeling the sudden pressure in the hall.

Waves of mana exuded from the location of the Meadow, increasing in power until it finally stabilized.

*Incredible.*

Catelyn realized Ilea had her ashen limbs connected to everyone, healing mana flowing into her too.

“I’m alright,” she said.

Ilea glanced over. “I know.”

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The council was dealing surprisingly well with the high mana coming from the Meadow. Her healing wasn’t exactly necessary, but she supposed it did help a little. If only to alleviate the overwhelming sense.

“*Way to make an impression,*” she sent to the Meadow.

“*I can’t change the fact that everyone is so incredibly weak,*” Meadow retorted.

Ilea snickered, rolling her eyes.

“*You got your place now. Happy?*” she asked.

“*Very, yes. This is... perfect. There is such an abundance of life here... some even close to awakening it seems,*” it said.

“*Well, do knock yourself out. Just make sure not to awaken whole tribes at the same time, or they might attack the town,*” she said.

“*It’s a lengthy process, one I can only nudge towards, not cause myself. I shall honor my obligations to Hallowfort,*” Meadow said.

“*That’s good,*” Ilea said.

“So that’s it. You have your four mark protector tree,” she said, looking at the glittering crystal tree in the distance, black grass growing on the ground, walls, and ceiling close by. The wall towards the cavern disintegrated slowly, letting more light enter the slowly expanding hallway, shifting at the will of the Meadow.

“Indeed... that we do,” Catelyn said.

"I'll be back at some point soon. If anything comes up, just call for me," Ilea said, walking towards the Meadow.

"I will. Thank you, Ilea," Catelyn said, glancing at her for a moment before her attention returned to the space creature.

*"I'll get back to you about that teleportation stuff. Hope you settle in nicely. And keep the godly acts to a minimum,"* Ilea said, stepping onto the shifting grass.

*"I will try. Though sometimes the odd miracle does slip out on accident,"* Meadow said.

*"Can't do anything about that, I get it. We are just too incomprehensibly awesome to fool people consistently,"* she said.

*"We? Oh don't lump your uppity weak self into the same basket as me, the great Meadow,"* it said. *"Would it be acceptable if your mark on me remains? You offered Catelyn to call for you but her perception is somewhat limited compared to mine. I'll be able to judge an enemy threat far earlier and may gauge if an intervention from you is needed."*

*"Sure, I have plenty of open slots. Just don't call me here for nonsense. Do call if you get lonely or want to vent about something. We're friends after all,"* she said and winked towards the general vicinity.

*"I do appreciate it, Ilea. More than you know. Now hush, I can feel that you are restless. These gatherings and talks bore you. Ah to be young and reckless again,"* it said.

*"You were never reckless,"* Ilea said.

*"But I was young,"* Meadow said.

*"I suppose you were. Hey, mind giving me a boost... lemme deactivate my space resistance. Hmm,"* Ilea tried to gauge where they were exactly, looking out into the crystal lit cavern to find anything resembling a landmark. *"This way I think. But up and out too."*

She pointed in a direction.

*"Of course. Your four mark transportation service is ready,"* Meadow said.

*"Hope you have a good stay. See you soon,"* Ilea said and touched the tree lightly.

*"Thank you. For everything,"* Meadow said.

Her view shifted, sunlight suddenly visible to her. Storms raged nearby, their purple lightning mangling the landscape relentlessly.

*Pretty far. Nice,* Ilea thought, looking back to where she assumed Hallowfort to be.

She sped up and flew through various storms as night slowly set.

Ilea arrived near the Izna dungeon when the mists started to fill each crevice, burrow, and crater as far as the eye could see.

The first spinning Miststalkers appeared soon after, twirling in their ethereal dance as the stars watched from above.

She entered the facility and quickly made her way towards the factory part of the dungeon.

Ilea didn't exactly have to use any skills to find her first victim.

She sneaked up from behind and jumped, hugging the floating being as the two slowly moved to the ground.

"Long time no see," she said and laughed as the being struggled to escape her grasp.

"Hunter of ash... I ask of thee... let go," Goliath said with his deep vibrating voice that came from everywhere at once.

Ilea obliged, rolling away before her wings flapped once to push her to an upright position. She watched the creature of stone and steel slowly float back up, his two golden eyes twinkling as he turned towards her.

"Here," Ilea said and stepped up to him, a plate held in her hands.

Goliath stared at the cake, his right arm moving towards it slowly before he hesitated. "For... me?"

"Of course. You mentioned it to Catelyn, didn't you," Ilea said.

The ancient blacksmith opened his otherworldly eyes wide, a deep and resonating sob resounding from him.

"Ashen huntress..." he said.

"Just take it and eat," Ilea said and laughed, sitting down on a nearby forge.

Goliath didn't have to be told another time, taking the plate before he grabbed an ever so tiny fork from a nearby impromptu workbench.

Ilea downright stared as he started eating, bringing tiny amounts of cake towards his head and into a small hole that opened where a mouth would be.

*That is his mouth.*

"Delicious," he hummed, continuing to eat in silence, his eyes changing in shape and intensity during the whole thing.

Ilea looked away at some point, unsure if it was appropriate to see for her.

The smith had extended his workshop down here in Izna. A dozen forges burned nearby, prototypes of armor and weapons displayed on shimmering green steel racks. Pieces of art were mixed in, much of it abstract enough to be indiscernible from usable equipment to Ilea.

When she glanced at the smith again, the cake was gone.

"Wonderful. Magnificent. Truly, a marvelous work of art," he said. "Was it thine creation?"

"Oh no. I'm not particularly good at baking. Popi made it, a friend from Ravenhall," Ilea said.

"Popi. A legendary maker then. I shall treasure his name and this memory," Goliath said and bowed in mid air.

"Why don't you do that," Ilea said with a smile. "How have you been?"

"Hmm, I have been well. Many options present themselves in this forgotten crypt of steel and death. Yet more secrets wait to be uncovered and I am never without a splendid task," he said. "I do see that thee has yet again expanded upon your experience."

"I'm glad you like it here," Ilea said. "What do you mean by that last comment?"

“I can feel the magic of the old spirits. You are rising, and soon you shall bloom,” Goliath said.

“If that isn’t super ominous. What do you mean by bloom?” Ilea asked.

“Evolve, to thine next stage of power,” the smith said.

Ilea squinted her eyes. “You just mean my Class evolutions, right? Not some weird ass metamorphosis for me to turn into a spirit?”

“I do. Yet there is much you have gathered. I will await your evolutions with anticipation,” the ancient being said.

*Is he appraising me like I’m some kind of ore?*

Ilea didn’t want to think too much on his words, instead changing the subject. “How have the Elves been? Still around or slaughtered somewhere in this tomb?”

“They are. Alive. Many nights and days have passed, since last they have visited,” Goliath said.

“I’ll go look for them then, I suppose,” Ilea said.

“I shall wish upon you, good fortune,” he said.

*Why does that sound like a bloody curse?* Ilea asked herself but didn’t comment, not about to hurt this old goodhearted craftsman.

“Oh hey, thought about giving you a mark too. So that you can call for me if I’m needed,” Ilea said.

“I may escape, whenever the circumstances demand such. Do not worry about this old steel touched,” Goliath said.

“Are you sure? Just in case, you know,” Ilea said.

The smith approached her and casually put his hand onto her shoulder. “Young one, save your limited spells for those in dire need. I am content, and safe.”

Ilea smiled. “Alright then. Nice to meet you again, Goliath. Oh! Before I forget!” she said and summoned her armaments, pushing mana and heat into it to activate the massive armor.

It started glowing with power, steam rising from the exhausts on her back before she switched into a battle stance.

Goliath clapped his hands together. “Wonderful. I knew you could reach the power to use it.”

She stored it again and grinned. “Took me a while to figure out.”

“I am aware that with your small frame and high speed, it is not the most suitable for thine needs. Yet I had been inspired by the dwarven creation, and sought to accomplish something similar in nature and yet tailored to you,” Goliath said.

“It helped train a few skills already. I’ll find a use for it, don’t you worry,” Ilea said.

“Those words bring joy to this old smith,” Goliath said.

Ilea laughed and waved her goodbyes, using Sentinel Huntress to try and track the Elves through this maze of a production facility.

*They’ve been here for some time. Let’s see how much they managed to achieve, she thought with a sly grin. Did they get past three hundred? Maybe even past four hundred... though I do doubt that. Especially if they fought together all the time.*

The first sights of residual magic made her speed up slightly, teleporting through the manufacturing plant in quick succession.

She went down each layer, quickly checking for anything moving. All she found were scraps. Centurion scraps, and the signs of explosions. Bent and blackened steel, dented floors and ceilings. Plenty of forges had been damaged and destroyed, spilled out liquid steel had cooled and merged with everything it touched.

*Messy*, Ilea thought and continued onward.

The factory ran deep, dozens of layers now cleared out by the group of Cerithil Hunters.

Ilea heard a muffled explosion, unsure on which layer she was by now. The sound was familiar enough for her to associate it with a Taleen Centurion.

She followed the noise, speeding up through the various layers until she came out in what seemed to be the bottom layer. Her sphere showed her only solid stone down below.

A large double gate at one end of the near empty steel layer had been blown open, the doors blackened and bent inward.

She displaced herself towards it and blinked through, finding herself in an expansive hall with one distant exit. The walls, ceiling, and floor were made of steel, like everything else in the facility, carved into the deep underground of the north. Spaced out magical lights on each side of the large hall shined in their eerie green light.

*Not quite as eerie if I can easily see*, she thought, stepping out onto the railing. Stairs lead down into the hall to her left, her current position about five meters above the ground floor. A single exit lay at the other end, remaining shut for now.

Flashes of light flickered ahead, created by the four armored mages and their foes.

The Elves were clad in steel armor, three of them in a rather dark variant that reflected little light, one of them in something a little more shiny, and thick.

The ground was littered with scraps of destroyed dwarven creations, shrapnel digging into the walls even where Ilea stood.

*Did I ever see-* she thought and noted that there were a few new Centurion variants present.

Six foes remained, two of them being Centurion Rippers, each holding four serrated swords in their respective four arms. Two looked like Guardians, six sword like arms extending in a curved way forward out of their central bodies. The main difference was that the swords were flying through the air most of the time, controlled by the wielder like a magical element.

The last two only had two arms, ending in canon like contraptions that gathered energy as they tried to make distance. Beams of bright yellowish light magic extended from their weapons, streaking through the hall with blinding velocity.

Ilea leaned onto the railings with her arms, relaxing as she watched the ensuing battle.

One might've thought the enemies overwhelming, if not for the various dents and shrapnel that suggested dozens if not more previously destroyed Centurions.

*No Praetorians?* she wondered.

Ilea watched a bright white barrier appear near one of the armored elves, runes showing on it that thrummed with energy. They had no discernible effect on the enemies but she was sure of their power.

*Elfie*, she noted, the elf clad in a armored robes and a steel mask that covered his face and hair.

The heavily armored elf didn't look quite as gracious, summoning daggers made of fire. He threw them in the general vicinity of the Centurions before the projectiles exploded in red flames. His armor had been damaged, the left shoulder piece mangled to the point of pointlessness. Half his helmet had been ripped off, revealing some of his red hair.

Heranuur looked even more imposing with the set of heavy steel plate, standing over two meters tall now, he faced three of the creatures himself. Instead of dodging, or avoiding them however, he let them strike.

Explosions spread out after he had entangled a Ripper's blades with both his hands and his armor. His laughter resounded through the entire hall, temporarily muffled by the explosions.

A shield appeared to his right, blocking a beam of energy before it flickered out again.

One of the six armed Centurions found itself entangled by wood in the meantime, roots growing from the ground before they immobilized the target.

Ilea assumed Neiphato had planned to let someone else finish the job, finding herself surprised when the wood continued to expand and grow, crushing the machine until its green lights flickered out, steel bent and ripped as its lifeless husk now lay entombed in a prison of wood. A deafening explosion burnt through the timber a moment later, contained and localized by the elven mage.

*Impressive.*

Seviir appeared near one of the ranged light magic users, his own steel armor covered by thin lines of bone. His hands expanded further with claw like protrusions that dug into the fast moving machine. He vanished yet again to avoid one of the beams, a shield of light appearing in front of him where he came to.

Elfie glanced back towards Ilea before he focused on the fight yet again.

Heranuur looked a little worse by now, more of his armor dented and ripped, barriers now flickering up around him to deter the downright blade storm coming for him.

He jumped back and threw four bright fiery blades, missing with each.

Ilea smiled, realizing what had happened.

The blasts of the explosions pushed the three Centurion variants towards him, making them stagger slightly before a bright dome came to life around them. Wood came to life within.

Heranuur and Seviir immediately went for the two ranged variants.

Elfie still had the capacity to block a few of their blasts with new barriers that came to life near himself and Neiphato.

It didn't take long for the trapped Centurions to crack and dent under the creation of the powerful wood creator. The three explosions resounded in quick succession, none of them breaking through the barrier. It did crack slightly but vanished at the will of its caster in the end.

Elfie turned and floated towards her while Neiphato kept an eye on the two remaining foes and their current partners.

“Welcome back,” the elf said as his mask vanished, the flowing red hair falling down his back as he smiled with a predatory grin.