

Ilea looked around the ruins. “I can’t keep the gate open for very long. You’ll have to rush through.”

“And who is to say that we can trust this... human?” a whisper said, coming from an elf sitting atop an overgrown cathedral. He vanished and appeared a few meters away. Tall, flowing blonde hair and pale skin. He wore a well made suit, quite different to the more practical armor most of the present warriors sported. A black jacket over a red shirt, black pants and what looked like dress shoes. All perfectly fitted. A silver necklace hung around his neck, eyes of the same color taking in the group that had arrived a minute prior. He leaned forward slightly and squinted.

**[Sound Mage – lvl ???]**

Ilea gauged him to be just above eight hundred.

“I do,” Isalthar spoke, eliciting a few hisses and glances.

“As do I,” Feyrair spoke.

“And me,” Maratas spoke, the ice mage not one to speak much but they did get more comfortable with each other in the times he helped her train her resistance.

“I don’t need you guys to vouch for me,” Ilea said with a smile. “I wish to destroy the Taleen. What does it matter that I’m human?”

The elf grinned, taking a step closer as he regarded her. “*I do not question your species, human. I do question your intent.*”

Ilea smiled. “*Then I suggest you step through the gate and find out where it leads. If I wanted to harm you, I’d do here and now.*”

“*That is a bold statement. And I don’t think you’re lying. Very well,*” the elf spoke and hissed in approval.

Others hissed in a similar manner.

*Dick measuring contests with lots of hissing. And I thought human politics was fucking annoying. This might actually be worse.*

“Anyone else wants to introduce themselves and their gigantic power? Or can we move on and destroy some machines?” Ilea asked. She saw a few grins and opened the gate, stepping through herself. Kyrian and Fey followed immediately, then Isalthar, Elfie, and plenty of others.

They spread out in the tight tunnel until the first earth mages appeared, stone cracking and shifting as their magic took hold.

Ilea raised her brows as she watched them work, the tunnel quickly expanding into a hall. She smirked at the fact that some of the mages added decorations, chairs, side rooms with stone doors. The earth mage who had talked to them even added a fountain, though it seemed a little strange to do so without a source of water.

The hole in the ground where the shaft had been was expanded. Railings were added as one elf spent a ridiculous amount of effort and mana on perfecting the circle, getting rid of any edges.

In less than two minutes the claustrophobic jagged underground tunnel had been transformed into a hall worthy of kings, a hundred meters in each direction with the circular entrance at the center of it all, stairs leading down towards the stone railings, light from the barrier shining up from within.

A dozen rooms had been added to the various walls, though it seemed strange. Like an imitation.

“What do you think?” the same earth mage said after he appeared next to her.

Everyone had arrived in the new space by now, Ilea’s gate long closed. She could see some of the elves standing in groups, others claiming a bench, some a table, others sitting on the circular stairwell at the center. A few used their magics to create small domains of their own. It was dim in the hall, the sources of light various magical spells conjured by the warriors. Just about eighty of them in total, all above three hundred, many of them far more powerful.

Elfie and a few others were standing close to the railings above the barrier, discussing in whispers and hisses.

“It’s very impressive,” Ilea admitted, looking at the green eyes of the burly elf.

“But?” he asked with a smirk, sharp teeth showing.

“It’s fake,” she said. “None of you need a hall like this. Tables to eat at, benches to sit on. A fountain, rooms. You don’t require shelter. You were born with the ability to survive in the wild.”

He raised his brows. “And that prohibits us from building a hall? From appreciating architecture? From seeking shelter?”

“Of course not,” Ilea said. “You can do whatever you want. And it is a nice hall. It just feels a little strange, I suppose. Because it’s not a way to flaunt wealth or power either... or at least it doesn’t feel like that.”

“How so?” he asked.

Ilea looked at him. “Your presence alone is far more imposing than a hall ever could be.”

He hissed in an amused manner. “I am Jomraa Irathim. You flatter me, Lilith. Though I suppose you are right, and yet it seems you have forgotten that most lower level beings fail to comprehend the power we truly wield.”

Ilea thought back to the slavers outside of Ravenhall. She nodded to herself and sighed.

“You do understand then,” he said. “Then again there is no reason truly to build this hall down here, where none such ignorant being would ever tread. And yet... I do enjoy it, and so do others.” He gestured to the three other earth mages, one of them still adding intricate patterns into the walls, another creating a mural on the ceiling.

“Artists more than fighters then?” Ilea asked.

Fey had joined the others at the center, Kyrian listening in silence. As did the blonde elf who had joined them mid conversation.

She didn’t mind, pretty sure everyone in the hall heard every conversation they were interested in. She blinked her eyes when she saw the ancient Cartaahn within a throne of growing crystals, the elf resting his head on his hand as he sighed, closing his eyes a moment later.

“Battle is... a part of what we are. But none shall claim we cannot be more. Or would you disagree? Lilith?” Jomraa asked.

"I don't think battle has to be any less worthy than art. Magic is expressive in many ways," she spoke and formed an ashen chair to sit in.

The blonde elf hissed. "I understand now why Isalthar likes you."

"She does enjoy battle," Kyrian said, the man still covered in armor and glowing slightly with curse magic.

"How else can you even befriend elves?" Ilea asked her friend before she glanced at the blonde one. "Most of those I meet attack me as some kind of greeting."

He grinned. "You may call me Zorithanael, human. And those attacks are neither greeting nor a playful bout. Most of our kind simply see other species as inferior, because when it comes to magic and battle, they usually are."

"Zori is fine I suppose?" Ilea asked, getting an annoyed hiss in response. She grinned.

Jomraa hissed in turn, amused at their short interaction it seemed. "And that arrogance has led to stagnation. The Monarchs bask in their superiority, squashing anything that would question the status quo. I have learned more from human, dwarven, and vampire literature than I would've in the domain I was born in. Most of them can't even read, and that is a shame."

"It pains me to say that I agree," Zori said.

"He was regarded as a far more important individual within our former domain," Jomraa explained. "Yet now we are both Cursed, the lowest of the low. Unworthy even of life itself."

"Good thing you got out then, sounds like a shit environment to live in," Ilea mused, summoning herself a bottle of ale.

An armchair appeared behind Zori, the elf sitting down with a smooth motion. "It isn't as lowly as you think. Jomraa sees our origin and instincts, our physical selves, as mere hindrance. A way to control what we do, by those who have brought life to our selves. I do not believe such. There is joy in the hunt, there is joy in battle, in killing, and I believe there is purpose in joy."

Jomraa rolled his eyes and hissed. "We have had a variation of this conversation a hundred times. He simply likes his own voice."

Zori smiled. "That I do. I am so... very eloquent."

Ilea noted the joyous look on his face when he heard Jomraa's annoyed hiss.

*Old friends indeed. Or perhaps even more.*

"You have been to Iz before. What will we expect?" Jomraa said, changing the topic.

"Back when we were there... an army of Hunter Praetorians, Executioners, and everything else the One without Form can bring to the table. Now? With that barrier in place? I have no idea," she said.

"More of the same," Kyrian said. "Overwhelming numbers."

"Each and everyone here has destroyed thousands of them before," Zori spoke. "Some few have destroyed entire armies."

"Not an army of Executioners," Jomraa said. "But yes. A gathering like this is... unprecedented. We could even face a domain."

A few hisses resounded.

“Careful now,” Zori spoke. “We are here for one reason only.”

The earth mage sighed. “We are all too old. Too set in our ways.” He glanced at the humans and bowed lightly, leaving to join the elf working on the mural.

Isalthar landed near them and looked at Ilea. “Our goal will be to destroy every Taleen machine within Iz. We will attack the core, but with a barrier as powerful as this one, it is possible we will not be able to break through. The keys will remain with you. If you can find a way to influence or destroy the One without Form, I trust you will do so.”

“That’s the plan,” Ilea said. *Now that I have all the keys, the central guardians shouldn’t attack me anyway.* She summoned her Taleen necklace and put it on, moving the keys from her domain into the artifact. Just to make sure they could sense them.

“There is... a favor, I have yet to collect. Yet I am not certain if it is feasible,” Isalthar said.

“Can I help with that?” Ilea asked.

“That depends. Are you familiar with one Evan Trayne?” the elf asked.

Ilea smiled. “Right through here,” she said as she stood up, summoning a gate to the southern desert.

Isalthar smiled ever so slightly, floating through the gate before Ilea followed.

The elf looked up at the suns. “I am not welcome in his domain. But he will know my name. Tell him, that the time has come.”

“I’ll have a chat if he’s around. Give me a few minutes,” Ilea said as she charged her wings. She was off towards the Foundation a moment later, flying high until she was intercepted by a group of Seekers. Some of them knew her, Ilea quickly let through.

She found Evan in a library she hadn’t been in before, the man downright buried in tomes. He didn’t look up when she appeared in front of him.

“Your presence here means several death sentences,” he said in a calm voice, still reading.

“Good thing that I can’t read,” Ilea answered.

“You are testing my patience, Ilea. But it’s you. So there’s not much I can feasibly do,” he said.

“What is it that you want?”

“I’m so terribly sorry, ancient librarian. It’s not about me though. Isalthar asked me to get you. He says it’s time. Or well, the time has come,” she said, the last bit with a dramatic undertone.

Evan closed the tome in a calm motion, standing up before he smiled at her. “Full of surprises. Very well. I will need a few minutes to prepare. What will stand in our way?”

“The most powerful barrier I have ever seen, aaaand a few thousand Taleen probably, maybe more. No... definitely more,” she said.

“I did not expect anything less from him,” he spoke. “Please wait here. And... don’t touch anything. Please.”

“I’m not a child, Evan,” Ilea said.

He looked at her for a few seconds before he nodded ever so slightly.

*Motherfucker.*

She picked up one of the tomes with her space magic, moving it into her hands before she opened it. Ilea didn't know the language.

She frowned, swapping the book with another one. Yet another language. She gave up when the third one was entirely written in runes.

*Well played, Evan. Well. Fucking. Played.*

He arrived a few minutes later, any obvious self satisfaction hidden behind his ancient and perfected control of his body and face. The energy however, was there.

She squinted her eyes, looking at the battle regalia he wore. "Nice armor."

It was a combination of bone and black scales, the design rather knightly despite the materials used. "Thank you, Ilea," Evan said, bowing lightly.

She could feel more magic about him now, likely from various items he had equipped for the trip. Ilea summoned a gate in the midst of the library. "This way," she said and walked through and into the desert a few kilometers south of the Foundation.

Isalthar floated in the air, looking like some ancient magical spirit. He raised his brows at Ilea.

"You're pissing me off," she said. *I need to fight something.*

"I understand, young healer," the elf spoke.

*Just. No.*

Evan walked through the gate in turn, the connection severed a moment later.

"Isalthar. Var elin na..." the librarian started.

Ilea stopped listening the moment she realized they were conversing in elvish. Because of course they were. She glared at the man and formed another gate without comment, stepping through to join Kyrian. *Finally. Someone not ancient and all knowing.*

The two others followed before she shut the gate, Evan showing quite a bit of surprise when he saw the gathered people. They quickly moved on to the barrier.

"You're so easily irritated," Kyrian said.

Zori smiled.

"They're doing it on purpose," she said.

"Of course they are," Kyrian answered.

"You will get to battle soon," Zori spoke.

Ilea sighed. *I hope so.* She ate another meal before she joined the group near the barrier, back to study the flowing space magic restrictions.

"*What do you think?*" she sent to Elfie.

He stood next to a few other Hunters studying the barrier below the central circle in the hall.

*“It is enormously powerful. To an extent I wouldn’t have thought possible... but I have not seen all the world has to offer,”* he sent and glanced her way. *“It once more puts into perspective what we face. Facilities are one thing but this... is a force of nature.”*

*You might be closer than you think, Elfie.*

*“There are enchantments in place that prevent teleportation, space magic even. Though it is taken into account that someone might be able to get through regardless. Once we do... and I do assume you have a way to manage such, they will know about the breach, and about where it happened. I don’t see a way for us to break through with conventional means, nor does anyone else here. Of course many still want to try regardless. It is quite vexing, to know the Taleen have put up a barrier we cannot breach with brute force,”* he sent, hissing to himself. He seemed a little bit embarrassed.

*“I get the sentiment,”* Ilea sent. *“I want to try and break in too. Haven’t had a barrier I couldn’t get in yet. If anything it’ll be a nice test.”*

Ilea of course knew what powered the barrier. Or she assumed as much. If it really was the source, the reason the Ascended had once come to Elos, then she didn’t see a way for a bunch of magic wielders to break through a barrier that was literally powered by a star.

*“I’ll get us through regardless. And once we’re in, it doesn’t matter anymore,”* Ilea sent. *“I wanted to ask something else. The item I have. The Azarinth Star. You saw me use it a few times when I trained with Ben.”*

*“The golden shields? You’re thinking it could be related?”* Elfie asked.

*“Any thoughts on that?”* she sent.

*“Not much. It is a powerful item, and the barriers are pure, but infused with healing both and arcane energy. This one here is far more basic in nature. It is the sheer power that is overwhelming. Though I suppose anything more intricate would shatter with mana this potent,”* he explained.

*No connection then,* Ilea thought. She hadn’t really expected anything, but it was nice to know.

Elfie listened to the people next to him talk in Elvish, adding a few words himself. Evan and Isalthar added more from the other side of the circular hole.

*“We are reasonably sure that attacks on the shield are not registered. A breach of course would alert our enemy but testing our strength will not be an issue, nor are there any measures in place to defend against attackers,”* the elf explained.

The shield was incredibly bright, but Ilea could still see through it. And on the other side was stone. *“If you want me to bring you through, I’ll need open space on the other side. Enough for everyone here.”*

Isalthar spoke a few words in Elvish, the Earth mages interrupting their work before they started moving towards the walls. Stone opened up before the mages walked into newly formed corridors.

*“They will search for a space such as what you have described, Lilith,”* Isalthar spoke.

*“In... the meantime,”* another elf spoke. This one wore green leaf like armor, a bird like mask covering his face entirely. Long black hair flowed out of the back, his hands twitching a few times as he spoke. He was crouched. *“You c... can... you can... try,”* he said and giggled to himself before he hissed a few times in a row.

Some of the other Elves hissed in turn, magic flaring up as they prepared to attack the barrier.