

“You fought an Elemental? I find that hard to believe,” Edwin said, shaking his head.

“You didn’t even know they existed a minute ago,” Ilea said and laughed.

He just waved her off. “Well, I for one saved the village of Verlan from a mud monster infestation in a nearby pond,” Edwin said, pushing his elbow into Jyrai. “Tell her about them, they were nearly level one fifty. Hardly ever felt my heart pump that fast. The adrenaline was overwhelming.”

“I can believe that,” Ilea said.

“It really wasn’t worth a mention,” Jyrai whispered, his soul trying to flee all on its own.

“Maybe I’ll be able to offer you an interesting position in the future, Edwin. Something that fits your abilities a little more than fighting mud monsters,” Ilea said.

The look in his eyes changed, his smile turning predatory. “So that’s why you came. And here I thought you’d just want to meet my dear little sister.”

*He’s still there after all*, Ilea thought and smirked back, Jyrai trying to get even further away. Aliana ate happily all the while.

“Don’t flatter yourself. Of course I came for her. It’s been a while since we prevented extensive blood rituals together in Baralia, effectively saving tens of thousands of human lives,” Ilea said.

“Ah, you’re a paladin now? Did the flattery of your mindless followers and admirers get to your head? Perhaps I should’ve taught you humility when I still had the chance,” Edwin said. “I also hear you slaughtered half an army in Riverwatch.”

“You don’t even begin to understand the beings I’ve faced. I don’t need a lost noble to teach me humility. I live with the choices I made. Maybe you should start to do the same,” Ilea said.

*And that wasn’t half. Not even close*, she thought, remembering the soldiers she had killed back then. It had been so easy. She shuddered, losing her appetite for a moment.

Edwin didn’t rebuke her this time, instead opening another bottle before he drank angrily.

“What a merry group of characters,” a new voice said, Felicia stepping into the room before she grabbed Edwin’s bottle, taking a few swigs herself. “And still so, so much better than what I just came from,” she said, throwing the bottle behind herself where Edwin appeared and caught it. Felicia smiled, looking at Ilea before she went to get a plate herself. “You should’ve heard General Gardt rant about incompetent Scouts when it was reported that you vanished within our very capital.”

She sat down and laughed. “Do you have some time? I’d love to hear about your adventures for a while, it’s been so very busy.”

Ilea smiled, still amused at Jyrai’s presence, the man managing to hide in plain sight. Perhaps a shadow magic class would’ve fit him better.

Edwin looked between them, his eyes focusing on Felicia for a few seconds before he glanced at Ilea and left without another word.

“You don’t have to stay if you’re uncomfortable,” Aliana said, looking at Jyrai.

The man took in a deep breath, closing his eyes as his heart rate increased. He opened them, a spark of flame visible within. “I would love to hear a few more stories, Lady Lilith. If you would have me.”

“I don’t mind. Just don’t spread it to the bards,” Ilea said. She wouldn’t mention the Elves or anything else controversial or grand. Felicia didn’t seem to be looking for that anyway. “I visited Halstein for the first time,” she started, soon enjoying another round of freshly prepared dishes conjured up by Aliana.

Ilea checked her armor and grinned. It felt good. Actually usable.

“Thanks, Iana,” she said.

“Now try this,” Goliath said and handed her his creation.

Iana smiled. “Let me know if you want any changes,” she said and joined back up with Christopher, continuing their work on the gates.

***[Heavy Scorching Wyrms Armor – Draconic Quality] Enchantments [Durability 5 / Hardening 6 / Mana Flow 3]***

*This thing should be hard to destroy even for a four mark. As long as I survive within it.*

Ilea put the armor into her necklace before she summoned it around herself. The weight was immediately noticeable but with all her buffs she didn’t mind it too much. She wouldn’t use this set in any battles where evasion was paramount anyway. Her ash simply formed on top of the wyrm scales, layering until she was covered in several sets of defenses. Ilea wouldn’t be performing any surgery in this armor but for punching, it was just right.

She looked at the prototype Goliath had created before she grabbed it. Ilea knew a rifle normally had several parts put together for everything to work. She didn’t know the details but this prototype was nowhere near anything that could fire an actual bullet. It had two massive grips without any triggers, one near the middle section of the rifle’s length, the other closer to the back. Its length was mostly smooth, a few openings allowing her to insert her ash.

Near the middle of the rifle was a large inset for the Wyrms eye itself, the rifle extending into a barrel beyond that. The width reminded Ilea more of artillery than anything a human would carry. On top and close to the shoulder stock was a long scope without any glass or tech inside. A simple tube, but with her enhanced eye sight it would serve its purpose. At the front of the barrel she could see a front sight that would help her align the whole thing.

***[Scorching Beam Cannon – Draconic Quality] Enchantments [Durability 5 / Hardening 6 / Heat Resistance 2]***

“I love it,” Ilea said as she aimed through the scope. She had never actually fired a rifle, or a gun for that matter, but a focus for her Embered Heart was very much welcome. She summoned the eye and displaced it into the inset, charging heat as a few ashen tendrils moved into the openings on the side of the cannon. “Can I get a wall, Meadow?”

The being obliged, creating stone that likely outclassed any defensive walls humans could produce.

“Think you could add a magnifying glass, Goliath?” Ilea asked as she released her spell through her ash, the heat extending into the wyrm eye before it was sent out through the barrel, a bright beam burning into the stone wall for a little over a second. She didn’t use a lot of heat but the result proved impressive nonetheless.

“I lack the knowledge and tools to create what you seek,” the smith said.

“*An impressive tool,*” the Meadow admitted.

Ilea looked at the scorch mark on its wall and put down the large focus. “You know, it’s mainly my magic.”

“*Of course,*” the being answered.

*Why do you sound sarcastic?*

“Let’s get back to the puzzles,” she said, storing her new toys before she appeared on the black grass.

The Meadow obliged without another word, likely busy with fifteen other tasks that demanded more of its attention.

Ilea spent weeks with the ancient creature, often returning to Ravenhall to air out her head a little. She could help out the Sentinels with her arcane healing after all, and in turn they tried to help with her resistances. To varying degrees of success, even with her ability to disable them entirely.

As time went on, Ilea found her intuitive understanding of space magic increase, allowing her to progress faster with the various puzzles presented by the Meadow. By now most of it seemed abstract at best. Concepts she simply felt more so than truly grasped. And still, she could find the solution, the missing links, the irregularities, and the hidden pockets.

The realization that struck her the most was when Baron Violence returned one day. His Faen form didn’t look quite as simple anymore. Where it had been an abyss like darkness before, it now gave her an immediately healed headache just looking at him. There were so many layers and shifting parts, she quickly made it part of her training to simply observe the creature whenever it graced them with a visit.

She spent plenty of time fighting the Griffin and Young Elemental in between, occasionally bothering the Trakorov as well.

Claire informed her about the progress on various projects during their rare dancing lessons. Ravenhall had extended the trade agreements with both Kroll and Lys, slowly bringing the nations closer both in regard to economic interests and diplomatic ties.

Trian all the while started his negotiations with the Order of Balance, thought neither the Sentinels nor Ravenhall as a whole had an interest in increasing influence of the Order within the southern mountains.

A Fae copy rushed after the original, several Knights of Lilith trying to keep up. One of the ashen forms wielded Quiet, the warhammer, another two wielding swords and shields of ash, one even wearing Ilea's bone armor.

The Meadow sometimes interrupted the ongoing battle with sets of obstacles made of roots or stone, while the rest worked quietly on their own projects.

"You look lost," Ilea said, right after solving the latest question posed by space itself. Or perhaps it was the Meadow who had asked. It had become more difficult to separate the two entirely.

Kyrian glanced at her and smiled lightly. Once more he took off his helmet around other people. Humans at least. "A little."

"Hmm," Ilea mused, summoning a dish before she started to eat.

They remained quiet as the horde of ashen beings rushed after the Fae. Ilea ate and looked through the many notifications she had managed to unlock.

**'ding' 'Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'**

**'ding' 'Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'**

**'ding' 'Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'**

**'ding' 'Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'**

**'ding' 'Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'**

**'ding' 'Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'**

**'ding' 'Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'**

**'ding' 'Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'**

**'ding' 'Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'**

**'ding' 'Phaseshift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 24'**

...

**'ding' 'Phaseshift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 29'**

**'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 28'**

...

**'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 30'**

**'ding' 'Displacement reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 25'**

...

**'ding' 'Displacement reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 29'**

**'ding' 'Space Shift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 23'**

...

**'ding' 'Space Shift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 28'**

***'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 28'***

...

***'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 30'***

***'ding' 'Space Awareness reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9'***

...

***'ding' 'Space Awareness reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 28'***

Ilea was sure that the massive jump in her third Class abilities were directly connected to her increasing Space Awareness. Everything felt connected. Well, everything except Body of the Valkyrie, which luckily only had a few levels to go and the creatures that had remained within the Descent were more than capable of pushing her to level thirty. Some with a little help of a disabled resistance and an unwillingness to evade.

She was glad to have achieved her awareness only after befriending the Meadow. With what she could perceive now, she wasn't sure their relationship had formed quite the way it had back in Erendar. Where she had known intellectually that the creature wielded magic beyond most she had met before, by now she could see a part of the truth. The Meadow had been seen as a god, and Ilea started to see why. Not based on understanding but quite literally her sight.

*"And here I thought staring was considered rude,"* the being said.

Ilea looked away. *"Sorry. I'll get used to it in time. You're just... a lot to take in."*

*"The burden of being the most beautiful being in existence. Don't feel guilty, human. It's only natural to fall for me,"* the creature said.

Ilea ignored the suggestions and read through the rest of her notifications. The group from the Krahen isles needed to push themselves a little more and asked for her help. That had been a week ago, and she felt like she was finally ready to risk some Class level ups once more.

*To think I would postpone it all to work on my skills. Maybe I really am fighting creatures that are entirely too powerful. But those in my level range are just so very boring.*

***'ding' 'Ashen limbs reaches lvl 3'***

...

***'ding' 'Ashen limbs reaches lvl 12'***

***'ding' 'Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 2'***

...

***'ding' 'Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 9'***

***'ding' 'Dancing reaches lvl 4'***

***'ding' 'Dancing reaches lvl 5'***

***'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'***

***'ding' 'Drill reaches lvl 2'***

***'ding' 'Drill reaches lvl 3'***

***'ding' 'Gourmet reaches lvl 7'***

*'ding' 'Monstrous reaches lvl 2'*  
*'ding' 'Oxygen Repository reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8'*  
*'ding' 'Sage of Torment reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10'*  
...  
*'ding' 'Sage of Torment reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*  
*'ding' 'Soul Perception reaches lvl 10'*  
*'ding' 'Spear of Ash reaches lvl 3'*  
...  
*'ding' 'Spear of Ash reaches lvl 14'*  
*'ding' 'Teaching reaches lvl 7'*  
*'ding' 'Teaching reaches lvl 8'*

Her derivative skills leveled throughout her training, the level ups making each specialization just a little better. Monstrous gained a level, apparently by simply having people identify her while it was active. Either that or the skill just gradually leveled as long as she hid her three mark status.

Ilea finally accepted that her ability to help the Sentinels train their Pain Tolerance and resistances outweighed her teaching capabilities. She would have to trust the faculty to do a better job there.

*'ding' 'Ash Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'*  
*'ding' 'Ash Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*  
*'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'*  
*'ding' 'Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

It hadn't come as a surprise to her that some of the Sentinels had learned from Orthan, the Alymie instructor being a capable bone magic user.

*'ding' 'Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10'*  
*'ding' 'Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*  
*'ding' 'Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'*  
*'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 23'*  
*'ding' 'Lava Magic Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6'*  
...  
*'ding' 'Lava Magic Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9'*  
*'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10'*  
*'ding' 'Petrification Resistance reaches lvl 8'*  
...  
*'ding' 'Petrification Resistance reaches lvl 14'*

***'ding' 'Wind Resistance reaches 3<sup>d</sup> lvl 10'***

"You fought the four mark Bluetail before?" she asked.

Kyrian glanced over. "Yes. I just need to know you're nearby in case I get caught in one of its high level spells. Even with the assistance, it should be enough to get me a few levels, and achievements for my evolution.

***[Metal Mage – lvl 441]***

Feyrair had apparently caught up a little but neither were incredibly close to their next evolution. Not if they didn't start fighting four marks soon, and preferably alone.

"I'm surprised you can even take the cutting winds," Ilea said.

"All depends on the angles. I can deflect them mostly, though it took me many tries to get it right. Training with the lower level ones for all this time helped," Kyrian explained.

"And Feyrair plans to take on a Wyrn," she said with a sigh.

"You think that less reasonable than the Bluetail? His resistance to fire and heat is incredible. Especially in his dragon form," he said. "I'm less sure about his ability to damage the creature. Even you had difficulties getting through. But I suppose it's worth a shot if he takes on one of the considerably weaker ones. He found a few of them already."

"Still four marks?" Ilea asked. "I doubt he could survive that sun spell."

"Not all of them, no. He's working on his resistances as we speak. And what better way to do that than facing the devastating magic of a four mark monster," Kyrian said.

"I know I do it all the time. Guess I'm just worried about you guys," Ilea admitted. She knew all of them could regenerate their injuries. Perhaps not quite as efficiently as she did, but they could survive quite a lot more than most.

Kyrian chuckled to himself. "Well, I told you I'd get to five hundred. After that we'll see, I suppose, but if my evolutions are anywhere near the ones you got, four marks won't be quite as frightening anymore. Low level ones that is. The Meadow is still terrifying."

"You have no idea," Ilea answered.

"*You two know I can hear you?*" the being asked.

"Yes, of course," Kyrian answered.

"Mhm," Ilea mused.

"Maybe we can try to fight it together," the metal mage suggested.

"Nope. That won't change a thing," Ilea said. "What we need is more levels and high resistances against all of its magic schools. Only then can we force it to use its strongest spells."

"What about an ambush? Does it not sleep?" Kyrian asked.

Ilea shook her head. "No. The Meadow is all seeing, always awake, its mana damn near limitless."

The man nodded. "A worthy opponent for you in that case. I wish you luck."

*“And there he goes, abandoning you,”* the Meadow said as a giggle rushed over the field of dark grass.

Ilea glanced at Kyrian and smiled. “No, you misunderstand. He just believes in me.”

“The future you. As you are now, there’s no way you could face that monster. Not that you wouldn’t try,” he said.

“I try every day,” Ilea said and bit her lip. “I’m sure I’ll succeed eventually.”

*“The score is four thousand eight hundred sixty two to zero,”* the Meadow informed.

“You keeping score just means there is a chance for me to win,” Ilea said with a grin. “Now give me the next puzzle. I’m itching to fight some more reasonable four marks again.”

They had yet to receive news from Isalthar, or any new findings from Niivalyr’s group. And yet Ilea felt like they would be ready soon, to both collect the other keys and start pushing into the capital of the Taleen.