

Ilea stared at the hammer and stopped her flames, the flesh all around the cavern now turned to ashes.

“This was the creature?” Feyrair asked, looking at the hammer.

**[Silent Memory – Divine Quality] – [The wielder’s intent will be unbroken]**

“So does that mean I can wield it with a new intent or will it still have the one before?” Ilea asked. “Four mark is gone too and we didn’t get any kill notifications. Kind of a scam really.”

“Why don’t you grab it?” Kyrian asked. “There’s still curse magic coming from it.”

“Think I can take it?” she asked.

“You did when it struck you,” the man said.

Ilea formed two ashen copies and infused them. *Get the hammer away from me if I turn mad or something.* She activated her fires of creation and teleported the framework of the hammer in front of her, holding it aloft with her space manipulation for a few seconds. “*You don’t speak, do you?*”

Nothing replied. Nor did she feel an established connection in the first place. So she braced herself and grabbed the handle. Immediately she felt a powerful curse flow into her, blood manipulation burning into her arm while serrated silver ropes grew out of the handle and around her arm. Ilea shook her head, shaking the arm as she heard whispers in her head. Nothing concrete, just a jumble of mad suggestions. Far less original than some of the mind magic she had encountered. “I don’t think this will work, Mr. Hammer,” she said and started pulling the thing off with a few of her ashen limbs.

The others watched as the thorns ripped out chunks of her flesh, scraping against her bone before half her arm was ripped off with the hammer in turn.

**‘ding’ ‘Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20’**

*Hmm*, Ilea left the hammer to dangle in the air, held by her ashen limbs while silver roots tried to gain purchase. “You’re like some angry eldritch creature. Calm down.”

The roots whipped out against her armor, some specifically aiming for her eyes.

“It looks like it can hear you,” Feyrair suggested.

The hammer moved all its silver roots to the ground and tried to leap at the voice but Ilea kept it firmly in place.

“You’re only allowed to do that to me,” she said and gripped it once more. “Wish some of these resistances were in the third tier. I could go with curse, I suppose. A high level one would be fairly annoying. No hammer, you don’t count.”

**‘ding’ ‘Curse Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1’**

**Curse Resistance – 3rd lvl 1**

***Curses are seldom cast and even more seldom survived. You are one of few individuals to tell the tale. Not a pleasant one to be sure but with this skill you might be able to survive it again should***

*the need arise.*

*2nd stage: The duration of curse effects is halved.*

*3rd stage: You must be the arch nemesis of several ancient cults, orders, and gods themselves. Curses meant to empower the effects of other magics on you now fail to apply such. Curses meant to inhibit your movement or teleportation now fail to apply those effects. You understand the basic ideas induced in a curse if it has been cast in the last week or if you analyze it for extended periods of time.*

“Guess we’re spending some time together,” she mused, immediately noticing the bone magic and blood manipulation weakening. “Ah don’t be like that. You’re not the only thing alive with anger issues. I’m sure we’ll figure it out.” She started pulling out silver threads from her arm where the metal had pierced her mantle and skin. The thing was surprisingly durable. Even just getting through her armor meant the thing would absolutely shred through most normal humans. Bits of flesh and blood splattered to the ground with every bit she pulled out, the steel going right back at it, unable to overwhelm her regeneration, nor did it manage to pierce her bone. She assumed that would be bad with its bone magic present but as it stood the hammer was more just a resistance training buddy. “Maybe we’ll both benefit from this,” she said and tapped the top of the thing with her hand, the entire limb pierced by a set of thorns.

She set herself on fire and ripped off her arms, burning the remaining flesh before she resumed her training.

“Sure you don’t want to bury that thing somewhere? Or destroy it?” Kyrian asked.

“Karth is Mount Doom now?” Ilea asked. “No, young human. The hatred in this hammer is not something defeated with the mere magic of our group.”

“Your mana intrusion would eventually crack it,” Feyrair said.

“Yes. It feeds on your blood and mana,” Kyrian added.

*Yes. Feed. Become stronger for more resistance levels,* she mused and looked at the thing with a broad grin.

Fey glanced to the curse mage. “Are you sure she’s still unaffected?”

“It’s hard to say. On the one hand, she’s cradling a cursed hammer that’s ripping her arms to pieces, but on the other hand, that’s entirely something she would do,” Kyrian answered.

“Exactly. So let’s move on,” Ilea said and tried to store the hammer in her bracelet. The thing vanished with quite a bit more mana used than she usually had to invest. She summoned it again a moment later. The spells were more potent this time. “So you’re actually feeding. Good to know.”

The two men glanced at each other but didn’t dare say anything.

*Yes, indeed. Be very careful now.*

“One more place cleared of curses and beasts, let’s move on,” she said and continued teleporting them through the relative darkness.

They continued for another half hour before Earth Spirits tried to lock them all in stone, moving tunnels and chunks of rock working against the quickly teleporting group. Ilea moved her group through to the other side, the spirits leaving them alone when they were out of their territory. They found marks of ancient burial grounds but neither were there any undead nor anything else that

attacked them. Perhaps one of very few non contaminated resting grounds in all of Elos. The crypt did look reasonably creepy at least.

Soon they started to hit dead ends more often than not. Ilea still refrained from simply digging down into the depths. She was reasonably confident in her ability to find Iz that way, mostly because of how truly massive that cavern was. But digging tunnels was a necessity, a need to an end, most certainly not her preferred method of travel. *Little but dirt to discover when you just cool aid your way through the depths.*

A few hours later Ilea finally managed to find a cavern that led down deeper. They broke into the dimly lit underground, lava flowing from a few cracks in the walls, a bright red river visible in the distance.

***‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Depths of Karth’***

“There you go,” Ilea mused and scooped some of the lava from a nearby wall. “Here, maybe that will calm you down a bit. Always helps me,” she mused and leaned into the stream with her new hammer in hand. The training had been quite fruitful.

***‘ding’ ‘Curse Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2’***

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***‘ding’ ‘Curse Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5’***

“I think this is far enough for today,” she said. “We’ll go deeper tomorrow.” Ilea set one of her gate marks and dried the lava off her hair. The hammer she just shook lightly, its form unaffected by the molten rock, as expected. “I’ll take you out again later. Don’t misbehave inside the pocket space,” she said and put the hammer into her bracelet. Ilea was pretty sure it couldn’t interact with anything else in her domain anyway but she wanted to make sure.

“Fey, where do you want to go? Riverwatch is pretty close to the Navali forest,” she said.

He had his face covered by scale armor. “The north is better to level. The chance of meeting a high level elf is lower too.”

“I beg to differ,” Ilea mused. “Give me a second, I’ll open another gate to get you out.”

Space shifted and a gateway to the domain of the Meadow formed. Ilea stepped through and requested the being send her to the edge of its domain. She set another mark there and connected it to the gate below Karth.

“You can come,” she said with her head poking through the fissure.

Fey and Kyrian came through.

“Contact me when we’re going deeper. I will look for a place to train,” the elf said.

“Will do,” Ilea answered. “Good luck.”

“Meadow?” she sent, both her and Kyrian appearing in the being’s domain.

“I’ll help with the preparations for a while,” he said and gave her a nod, the man walking over to Trian.

“I’m ready,” Ilea sent to Iana.

“Wonderful, we’ve got everything over here,” she answered and appeared to the side of her home.

Ilea joined the enchantress and looked at the absolute pile of stone and metal. “I expected gates, not an assembly kit.”

“It has to be assembled at the location and we have to add the finishing touches,” the woman said. “But with your space magic, it’ll be easy. You can just store it all and then teleport the pieces to the right place.”

“If you’re around to guide me, sure,” Ilea said.

Iana summoned a few large crates. “Can you fill this pile into the first one?”

Ilea used fabric tear to move the chunks, filling all the crates with the materials indicated by the enchantress before she stored the crates themselves. They were indeed quite large. Even larger were the outermost pieces of the gates. Those she stored separately. “Is it not relevant which ones these belong to?”

“They’re marked as well, don’t worry,” Iana said and waved over Christopher.

He smiled as he joined them. “Is it time?”

“Yes. Let’s connect the human Plains,” the woman said with a broad smile.

“Excited are we. Where do we start?” Ilea asked.

Iana shrugged. “Of course we are. We start in Morhill.”

Ilea noted the large platform the Meadow had added to its domain, on the way to Hallowfort that was and a few hundred meters away from the Soul Forge and everything else central. She assumed it had to do with the mana density. That and potential security concerns.

She teleported the group to her home, then out above. Ilea spread her wings and grabbed the enchanters like she had before. “It’ll be a short flight.” She didn’t wait after her wings had charged, the group shooting off towards Ravenhall, past it and to Morhill.

*They haven’t been idle*, Ilea mused as she slowed down a kilometer away from the town. The nearby mountains made it a rather well defensible location. Against non flying combatants and monsters. The walls looked more sturdy. Reinforced with enchantments and patrolled by Shadowguards. She spotted a squad on a rooftop close to the wall ready to intercept her. The town was covered in snow but its streets were busy, smoke rising from various kitchens and forges.

“So where do we place it?” Ilea asked. “Outside the city?”

“No. Morhill is going to be a main hub. Everything in it is set up with that in mind. Just get us into the city. I’ll lead from there,” the woman said.

Ilea did as she asked, the squad of flying guards escorting them in as soon as they saw them up close.

Iana landed in the snow, a map in her hand before she walked off.

Ilea gave Chris a look and followed with a smile. She saw dozens of buildings she knew hadn’t been there before. The whole town looked much more densely packed than before. She followed the enchantress into a large stone slab of a building, dozens of magical defenses placed on its walls. The double gate opened with a touch of Iana’s hand, shadowguards to the side giving them a nod.

Inside was essentially a waiting hall. Benches had been set up all around, a broad stairwell at the center of the structure leading down at a steep angle. She noted various enchantments and

mechanisms in place that would block off the way down in case of a breach. They finally came out into another hall. A round central platform stood elevated at the back, three steps leading up in a circular manner.

“Less security than I thought,” Ilea commented.

“That was a long discussion, yes. Claire wanted them each separated and even farther below ground, permanent walls in the way and destructive enchantments in place to destroy each gate in case of a breach. Most of the other council members thought that unreasonable, even Sulivhaan. The security of the gates is inherent in their technology and the keys needed to activate them. The goal is to have Morhill used as a public hub, not restrict and slow down the use of the gates to a crawl. This was the compromise. A bit of both. Additional connections between the various involved allied settlements will be added in secret of course. It also makes the city a reasonable target. Not an easy one but if any factions decide to attack, they may think Morhill a good place to strike. Which is intended,” Iana explained as she stopped near the large open socket at the top of the platform.

“It’s a show of trust too in some manner,” Christopher added.

“Don’t think any major power would be stupid enough to jeopardize their relationship with the people who have teleportation gates,” Ilea said. “But I’ve encountered some insanely stupid factions. Or well, just insane factions. Each gate is in one of these buildings and below ground?”

“Yes. We have thirty two set up for now, all separated but less than ten minutes from the center of the town. Shadows and Shadowguards will be present at all times and automated responses are in place to shut down a breach should one occur. I deem that highly unlikely,” Iana said.

Ilea summoned the crates and side pieces, the enchantress pointing at the ones she needed for this one. “If a four mark of some kind appears through one of these gates, a few enchantments and guards are not going to stop it.”

“Not stop. Slow down, distract, mislead,” Iana said. “Evacuation procedures are in place too. And don’t forget... this one here will lead to the domain of the Meadow. One guard or message sent through and we’ll have a four mark Greater Lich to come and help.”

“Owl agreed to that?” Ilea asked.

“She was delighted. Her training with the Meadow will continue for a long while, and she’s set up permanent residency in its domain. Though I’d imagine she won’t get near as much combat experience from this as she’s hoping,” Iana said.

“She’s set up residence? Like a ghost castle or something?” Ilea asked.

“It’s proven... difficult, I believe. She doesn’t really have a use for most mundane equipment. A bed, walls, things like that. But I believe she’s figuring things out with Goliath and the Meadow. A heated debate as I understand. Her home looks more like an art gallery right now,” Iana said.

“Interesting topics but we’re here to set up a gate,” Christ said.

Iana nodded and started to point at the first pieces.

Ilea teleported them out of the crate and made them float with her space manipulation. They were already done a few minutes later, everything fitting with a satisfying precision.

“Praise to the Meadow,” Iana said.

“Don’t make it a god again,” Ilea said, rolling her eyes.

“My next evolution could allow for divine enchantments. That’s rare, Ilea. Just haven’t convinced the tree of their potential yet,” Iana said.

“That doesn’t sound like something you’d be interested in,” Ilea said.

“Not interested in using. I’m interested in learning from them. To siphon power from a god like creature into preset enchantments. Understanding how that works could solve a lot of problems inherent in the limitations of enchanting,” the woman said and summoned a key. She stepped over to a small control panel and inserted the device. Magic flowed from her into the ground as the gate hummed to life.

She removed the key and stepped onto the platform. “Fellow teleporters, please enter the designated space.”

Ilea couldn’t help but smile back, her enthusiasm infectious. *Thousands will experience this in the coming years.*

“The first official teleport between Morhill and Hallowfort,” she spoke before kissing Chris.

All three of them vanished a moment later, the space magic smooth and non threatening.

Ilea couldn’t help but marvel at the ease at which the fabric moved, their position changed until they were no longer in the southern plains but far north and in the domain of the Endless Meadow.

“*Welcome back,*” the being spoke. “*Not exactly a step for my great self, but a monumental leap for the species of Elos.*”

“*How do you even know that quote?*” Ilea asked.

Iana and Chris separated, both smiling at each other.

“*I just made that up, Ilea. But your language has so few words and such a limited scope, I’m reasonably sure everything that can be said with it has already been spelled out,*” the being answered.

“*Fair enough. Can’t all have a set of eldritch brains,*” she answered and addressed the enchanters. “Where to now?”

“Riverwatch,” Iana said immediately.

And so they moved through the lands, Ilea’s gates and long range teleportation allowing them to set up the first teleportation gates within the Plains and beyond. Riverwatch had already set up a structure outside the city, the gate inlaid and its counterpart added to one of Morhill’s halls. A few hours later, Yinnahall was connected too.

Ilea grinned when they reappeared in the north, using only the available gates and their own mana to power them. “It’s all coming together.”

“*Yes. That’s the whole point. I’m glad you finally understood it too,*” the Meadow mused.

She ignored the comment, more than happy with the progress.