

“I take it this Meadow is quite powerful?” Aki asked.

Ilea calmed down, still grinning at the elf. “You can fake confidence, that much I give you. Meadow is like a literal god. Far beyond anything anyone I know could fight. Well someone might but that’s beside the point.”

“Wait, you know someone who can fight that tree?” Feyrair asked suddenly.

She smirked. “Ah but were you not evenly matched?”

The elf paused briefly before his fake pride apparently won out against his curiosity. “Of course. You were talking about me.”

“Exactly,” Ilea said. “Who else could be as impressive and powerful as you, dear Feyfey.”

“We agreed on not using that nickname,” he said.

“You’re right. My apologies,” Ilea mused.

Aki made a noise that sounded a little like him clearing his nonexistent throat. “Then I shall await your return, Ilea.”

She could tell the dagger was excited at the prospect of an even stronger body. She understood of course. *I’ll have to make sure I’m strong enough to solo an Executioner before we even try this*, she thought, squinting her eyes at the machine.

Ilea trusted Aki, despite his nature and potential history. Or even enchantments that would change his mind. Iana had already worked on stabilizing his mind and personality, hopefully they could prevent tampering by an outside source as well. What she didn’t like about him controlling an Executioner was the fact that he would effectively be stronger than her.

And she knew that even the calm and responsible Aki he had become would be teasing her nonstop if he had the capability of beating her in a fight.

“Is something wrong with me?” Aki asked in a teasing voice, tilting his head to the side slightly.

“You’re just a little too excited... is all,” Ilea said, squinting her eyes once more.

Aki chuckled. “Oh but what would make you think that, oh great Lilith. I would surely not abuse the power bestowed upon me by your excellency.”

She nodded very slowly. “Suure.”

“Now leave. I know why Trian called you here. One of my students might be in danger, though I rather pity the fool who trapped him,” Aki said.

Trapped. I hope you’re right, Aki, Ilea thought and smiled. “We’ll make sure we find him. Until next time.”

“I believe I haven’t introduced myself. Feyrair Kaa. Apologies again for the misunderstanding,” Feyrair said and bowed gracefully.

“There is no need to apologize, Feyrair Kaa. Sal... var... nakuun,” Aki said.

The elf stood there silently for a moment before he smiled. “Navii.”

Ilea looked at them with raised eyebrows before she left, the elf in tow. She displaced them through the city until they reached the outermost walls.

She did add anti space magic enchantments into the walls. Nothing better than in the office though, but at least it's something, she thought and walked towards the nearest gate with Feyrair.

“What did he say there in the end?” she asked.

The elf glanced at her, only his eyes visible due to his concealing armor. “Hmm. What indeed.”

She smiled. “Mysterious, are we?”

“Perhaps a trade would let me share the secret knowledge of the Elven language with an outsider such as yourself,” Fey said.

Ilea looked at him, the two exiting through the city gate. “And what would you suggest is a fair trade for the knowledge of a few Elven words?”

She spread her wings, a few travelers glancing at the duo with interest and awe.

Feyrair did the same, white flame flaring out behind him as he ascended next to her, the two quickly on their way northwards.

“Gate?” he asked.

“No. It's faster to fly from here,” Ilea said.

“I see. As to the trade... why don't you tell me who you know that could beat the Meadow?”

Ilea grinned. “Ah so you were that curious after all.”

“Well, I can already beat that tree easily, but it is a powerful being. It's only natural for me to seek even more dangerous foes,” Feyrair suggested.

“Obviously,” Ilea said. “I've met a Fae.”

The elf hissed, his eyes opening wide as he grinned from ear to ear. “Now your Class makes sense... did you meet... you know, a real one?”

“The whole,” Ilea said. “You know about them then?”

“I've heard stories. But everyone who interacted with one of them said they were weak and powerless. The only logical conclusion I could come to was that they were illusions, part of a whole, or versed in trickery. But your suggestion that the Fae could fight Meadow makes me think that the respect they garner from ancient Elves isn't misplaced,” he explained.

“The small ones are just part of a collection of minds. The full things is... well you've met the Meadow. It's a similar experience. Otherworldly. I'm friends with one of the parts and the whole... well it didn't eat or kill me, so that's a good sign. But you met a dragon, right?” Ilea said.

Feyrair suddenly looked thoughtful, his hair losing color as he looked forward. “We both met creatures beyond what we thought could exist. Meeting isn't the best word... it was a random encounter, but you know how I am,” he said and grinned.

“You attacked it immediately,” Ilea suggested.

He grinned. "It must've taken a liking to that. Or it had a purpose... maybe it liked my armor, my hair, who knows. I woke up with my body burnt beyond recognition, but alive. And knowing a name I hadn't known before."

"Not a very spectacular story," Ilea said.

"The truth rarely is, isn't it?" Feyrair said. "But I vowed to find it again. Some day."

Ilea smiled. "You want to fight it?"

He considered for a moment. "I don't know. I don't know if it is possible."

"With enough time and evolutions, everything is. I've fought and killed astral spirits the size of a city and survived. And so can you. A Dragon is just a few steps above that, if at all," Ilea said. "I'm excited to beat Meadow too, as you should be."

Feyrair laughed, his contemplative expression gone. "You're so young... and yet when you say it so simply, I can't help but believe you. Sure, let's fight and fight, until we can take on even the ancient horrors slumbering in their lairs and caverns."

"It's really not that far fetched. You're basically a dragon yourself already," Ilea said. "And I'm getting closer to becoming an Elemental."

"I'm definitely on the better path there," Feyrair mused.

Ilea smirked. "Ah I wouldn't be so sure. Icy was pretty fucking cool. But I'll reserve my judgment until I've met a Dragon myself."

"You already have," Fey said, pointing at himself with a confused expression.

"Yeah Icy wins that round. Easily. No contest," she said.

"I don't believe you mentioned Icy before," Fey said.

"It's a friend of Meadow's. An Ice Elemental, though it stayed in its own realm. I hope to meet it again someday," Ilea explained.

The elf hissed. "Of course it is. If anything, I'm glad I have met you, Ilea. Finally someone who can appreciate the finer things in life. It's so rare to find these traits in a Cerithil Hunters."

"Because they all die super quickly?" Ilea asked.

"Precisely. The only reason I'm still around is Isalthar," Feyrair said. "But now I've found another healer, and I've become quite durable myself, far gone are the offensive Classes I focused on in ages past. Though sometimes I miss the overwhelming power."

"Not worth it if you die when you're halved," Ilea said.

"Easier said than truly understood. Not until you experience getting halved," Fey mused.

"Try losing your head," she said. "You didn't tell me what Aki said yet."

He smiled. "Sal Var Nakuun... I'd say it means good fortune. To which I replied with Navii, which might mean something along the lines of I respect it, or I respect what you said."

She rolled her eyes. "Perfectly mundane. Of course it is."

Ilea looked through the messages still remaining from their stay in the Praetorian facility. The flight to Baralia would take a few hours at least.

'ding' 'Your groups has defeated [Executioner Praetorian – lvl 800]'

...

'ding' 'You have defeated [Hunter Praetorian – lvl 750]'

'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 473 – Five stat points awarded'

...

'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 476 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 467 – Five stat points awarded'

...

'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 470 – Five stat points awarded – One Core skill point awarded'

'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 419 – One stat point awarded'

...

'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 425 – One stat point awarded'

'ding' 'Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 18'

'ding' 'Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 19'

'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 23'

'ding' 'Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 20'

'ding' 'Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 21'

'ding' 'Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 17'

'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 19'

'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 20'

Compared to her earlier efforts, Ilea downright bathed in the core explosions this time, deactivating her resistances and defenses to get whatever she could for her general skills.

'ding' 'Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 20'

'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 13'

'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 14'

'ding' 'Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 8'

Ilea hoped that the Elves wouldn't find an untimely end, her resistance training deal hadn't even started after all.

Feyrair was closing in on level four hundred as well, the elf progressing at a frightening speed. She really did wonder if the opportunities simply hadn't been the same or if he was holding off on leveling to gather achievements and general skills.

The two flew through the plains, the elf agreeing to be pulled by Ilea's ash due to her faster speed. She did have to insist based on the potential danger one of the Sentinels was in.

Ilea started flying slower when they reached the northern parts of Lys, or what she thought were said parts. Her map helped of course but without any landmarks or Huntress marks to guide her, finding specific settlements wasn't an easy task.

She landed on a small road she spotted in the distance, flying a few meters above ground until she saw two travelers a few hundred meters ahead. "Keep your armor on," she said to Feyrair. "And don't eat the locals."

"But that's the only reason why I'm here," he mused, still a little grumpy at having been carried by ashen limbs. He was the dragon after all.

Ilea did reassure him that his wings would surely get better in time, not talking about how early she had gotten her Ashen ones.

She landed a few meters behind the two men and their donkey pulled cart filled with various bags. Food and drink mostly. "Greetings travelers," she said, watching the two jump and spin around, the older man drawing a shortsword.

He wore a simple shirt and trousers, barely any hair remaining on his scalp. The younger man seemed to be in his teens, conjuring fire as he took a step back at the sight.

Ilea only had to wait a few seconds for the two to realize they were a little in over their heads when it came to martial power.

"The Specter..." the older man murmured, his hand shaking before he steeled his resolve.

[Warrior – lvl 24]

[Mage – lvl 30]

Ilea thought it funny that who seemed to be the son had a higher level. She ignored Feyrair as he walked to the mage and inspected the flame with curiosity.

"We're not here to fight you," she said. "We're looking for a place called Samethol. Do you know where that would be?"

"Your control is impressive for that level. You're not a mere fire mage. Show me what you can do," Feyrair said and burst out in white flame, teleporting to the side as he gestured for the boy to join him.

"Don't kill him," Ilea warned.

The warrior glanced between her, the elf, and the boy. "Samethol is... a town west of here, several day's travel but you'll have to turn back to find the road leading into the forest. It's a dangerous road to travel at night."

Ilea smiled when she saw the boy muster his courage, sending a few wisps of flame at the monstrous elf. "Do you know the specific distance and direction?"

The man scrunched his brow, turning towards the forest and pointing. "It's hard to say miss, but I'd say about this way. There is an inn ahead, perhaps you could hire a guide."

"We're leaving," Ilea said. "Thank you," she added with a glance to the man, summoning a piece of silver.

"You are still frightened of the flames. You must embrace them, as part of what you are. Do so and you will find enlightenment," Feyrair said as he spread his wings.

"How do I do that?" the boy asked.

"Conquer your fear. That is all that I'll tell you," Feyrair said.

"Who are you?" the warrior asked with wide eyes.

"Travelers. Good luck on your way," Ilea said and spread her own wings, ascending to join the elf.

She heard the mage whisper as he watched her fly away. "Lilith."

"Lilith," Fey mimicked the awe inspired word when they were hundreds of meters away, laughing. "You don't like it? Your name is known to many."

"I don't like the attention, no," Ilea said. "But I guess it can be useful."

"They were frightened with your name or without," he said.

"Did you really care about that level thirty mage?" Ilea asked.

He hissed. "You have such interesting ways to develop magic... at such low levels, your possibilities are so versatile. That boy could follow paths never tread before."

"And what would he have to do to... conquer his fear?" Ilea asked.

He grinned. "Burn down his town, set himself aflame, burn monsters trice his level without fear in his heart. I doubt he has what it takes, but I have been wrong about people before."

"Wonderful. Ah well, I became a fire mage by burning myself as well. Who knows," Ilea said.

"But you're a healer. He doesn't have that luxury," Feyrair said.

"Well then he should become one first and try afterwards," she suggested.

Fey pointed at the distant smoke, the trees here spaced out far more, even terrain making way for large boulders and stone breaking out from beneath grass and roots.

"Becoming a healer isn't as simple as you think it is," Fey said, especially for someone with an affinity for fire.

Ilea landed on a dirt road that led towards the rising smoke. She knew from experience that the town wasn't in flames. They were probably just cooking.

"With the Sentinels, it is," she said and smiled.

He hissed. "That is your organization then? Though I assume the training isn't quite that easy."

"No, it's hard. But the people who join aren't random people wanting to be adventurers. It's nothing compared to what they'll have to face out in the wilderness," she said.

"The wilds are the best place to learn, that is true. Though I suppose the knowledge and guidance of more experienced mages and scholars could be beneficial. Not something usually done amongst Elves," Fey mused.

They walked the rest of the way, seeing the small town in the distance. "You're given your Classes by the Oracles who make you, right? And diverging afterwards isn't really a thing?"

"We are. Yes... it's much harder to diverge, for various reasons. Even amongst Hunters, direct experience is usually preferred to guidance. However after so much time, I can definitely see the merit. Teaching Elves though... especially young ones... that is a task I don't wish on anyone."

"You just need to beat them down often enough. I saw Elfie do it," Ilea said.

"And yet they betrayed us," Fey said.

Ilea ground her teeth. "Yeah. Not something I expected, that's for sure. I'll definitely want to have a word with them."

Feyrair hissed. "If they're alive. The domains don't think highly of Hunters, let alone the Sanvaruun."

"I saw them. Why would he have waited with killing them?" she asked.

"To gloat? To torture them? Who knows. I don't know him like Isalthar does," Feyrair said.

Ilea grunted, the two reaching the low stone wall going around the town of Samethol. Ivy and shrubbery already climbed some of the defensive perimeter, a single man in a brown duster leaning lazily next to the closed iron gate.

He only noticed them when they stopped a few meters away, looking up before he sneezed.

"Shadow?"

"Amongst other things," Ilea said, summoning her badge and throwing it over.

The man fumbled, missing the object before it reappeared in his hand. He did a double take before he righted his hat and cleared his throat. "You may enter."

Didn't even look at the badge, Ilea thought.

[Mage – lvl 104]

"Cheers. Where do I find the local guild?" she asked.

"No guild here. But if you're looking for jobs, check the inn. Haya is the one you're looking for, can't miss her," the man said.

"Big building on the left?" Ilea asked.

He grunted affirmatively and opened the small gate.

Ilea smiled under her armor, changing into simple clothes before she moved her ash to her neck. Feyrair still looked like some kind of high level armored warrior however, but she didn't particularly care.

“No offense, but that look won’t inspire as much fear and respect,” Fey said when they entered the town proper.

The people around glanced at the newcomers with caution, quickly moving on not to draw attention.

“That’s the point,” Ilea said. “You know, sometimes I just want to feel like a normal person.”