

Ilea had him. Funnily enough, it wasn't a conversation after centuries or the promise of finally seeing another set of walls that convinced the dwarf but instead the mention of a new version of machine Guardian.

He whistled as he leaned back. "Level eight hundred! Now that I won't believe until I see it," he said, mood visibly improved. He refilled his mug and downed it. "Ye were with the makers ye said?"

"Well, it's a little complicated. A lot of time has passed and power has shifted," Ilea said. "You might find yourself not quite at home if you go back to Iz."

The dwarf suddenly paused. He glanced down at the table and fidgeted with his mug. Finally he looked up. "I never been."

"Might be for the best," Ilea said. "But you've protected this monastery for long enough," Ilea said and stood up. She opened a gate to the Meadow's domain and stepped through. Her eyes fell on Aki. "*May I ask for your assistance? I found a surviving member of the Taleen. Could use your... convincing form.*"

The machine stepped over. "*Should I mention that my origin was of elven kind?*"

"*Funny,*" Ilea said and stepped back through.

"What in the world... is that a new gate enchantment? Portable?" the dwarf asked, now standing with his battered Centurion at his side.

"Something like that," Ilea said when the massive Pursuer came through the portal, unfolding like some kind of silver spider before he crouched inside the dark hall.

"Greetings," he spoke. "I am the Pursuer of Akelion."

Gretmoor spread his arms and laughed. He looked to Ilea with a broad smile. "And it speaks! Oh how far we've come!"

Yeah, about that, Ilea thought. She gave Aki a rundown of what the dwarf has been tasked with.

"An honorable duty. One that I see as fulfilled in this age," Aki spoke. "Though I do wonder, if perhaps you were chosen as a guardian of a key instead."

Ilea summoned the piece in question, looking it over.

[The Lead Key – Ancient Quality]

Ten down, two to go. She made it vanish.

"I had no knowledge of it being here, Pursuer," the dwarf said, shaking his head lightly. "Perhaps I was chosen, though I wouldnae know why."

"You're loyal, to an incredible degree. I can see plenty of reason to choose you over someone else," Aki spoke. "The world has changed while you were gone. The Taleen are not exactly how they used to be. Are you willing to learn and adapt? Or would you choose to remain here, guarding this ancient monastery?"

“What ye offer is tempting,” he spoke. “And tis true. Long have I guarded this place. And still, it has come into ruin.”

“I know someone who could help with your guardians,” Aki said.

“I have failed to keep them maintained, and I will bear the punishment,” Gretmoor spoke with a sincere tone.

“There will be no punishment. As I said, the world has changed. Please take a seat. There are some truths that will not be easy to accept,” Aki said. *“I will tell him about the fate of his peoples, though not of the One without Form, lest he thinks it his new purpose to defend it.”*

“I’d like to avoid antagonizing a faithful paladin,” Ilea answered. *“I think you’re right. The way he’s looking at you, you may as well be his new god.”*

“I wish to avoid such declarations of divinity, much like yourself. Factually however, it’s undeniable that both of us are in a very rare minority, when it comes to personal power,” the machine answered.

“Just ignore it, and let the Meadow ground you,” Ilea said. It has been her way of dealing with these kinds of thoughts. That and her very secret identity, the mythical Lilith. Most of her feats she could just push onto that growing legend, bard songs the least of her concerns at this point.

She checked her locator once again and found it pointing westward, neither north nor south. *Problematic.* The monastery was already located quite far west on the Naraza mountain chain which meant the closest key was potentially within Elven territory. *Or beyond. Let’s hope for that.*

“I’ll be off. It was good meeting you, Gretmoor,” she said with a smile.

“Good to meet you, maker! Thank you,” he spoke.

She did feel a little bad about lying to him, but with how dedicated he seemed to his cause and peoples, the dwarf would’ve likely just gone into a frenzy if she had told the truth. She could’ve let him here but now he had a chance to adapt, to not rot away in his ancient prison.

There was a lot they could learn from him about the ancient Taleen culture but she didn’t care too much. With punishments, arrogance in terms of their machines, a wish to exterminate elven kind. Well, they seemed like just another faction that may as well be gone forever. Just like the Azarinth. The few bits of conversation she remained to hear between him and Aki suggested he wasn’t exactly involved in the grand plans of his peoples.

She still wondered why the key was here. Sure, it made sense to put it somewhere inconspicuous, somewhere nobody would search for it, but as far as she understood, the keys also meant power. They weren’t just given to anybody, and with what they had learned down in Iz, the Makers weren’t exactly known to share their influence. *A last ditch effort then? Where they pressured that much to get the keys away?* If she had learned anything from the many rulers she had met in the past years, she didn’t dismiss the possibility of this being yet another way to weaken an enemy faction. Perhaps the Lead Key was supposed to go to someone in particular, and another deemed it better for the thing to vanish into some unimportant monastery.

Not like I’ll ever find out about it. The most important bit was that she had the key in her possession. She formed a portal for the group, the dwarf led through by the Pursuer himself. Aki held the second far more damaged Centurion in what looked like a princess carry. A rather bizarre sight.

The gate shut and she was left in the dark monastery. "Cold and moist," she murmured, looking at the piles of ancient metal. "And he survived all this time. Bit of a screw loose but maybe the others can help him find some new purpose," she spoke. *Not like he can go to Iz for now, and all the other places he had once known are dungeons by now. That or ancient ruins.*

So, what now. Two keys remain, she thought and teleported up and out. Her wings spread before she lazily flew along the partially snow covered mountains. Lightning occasionally lit up parts of the horizon towards the north, a purple tinge to the phenomenon. Forests spread to the south, far below the high reaching mountain chain that provided an impressive natural barrier.

Already she was past the latitude of Karth and Riverwatch, the locator still pointing west as the mountains lost some height. Ilea slowed down a few hours later, when a valley broke through the ancient barrier, reaching northwards with luscious forests and roaring rivers. Beyond, the mountains continued, the valley a mere dent in what looked like the spine of the world. She squinted her eyes as she landed on a large boulder, neither ice nor cold bothering her in the slightest.

What she saw was smoke. Not a mere column but what looked like a wide spanning weather phenomenon. Entire clouds that slowly moved in the wind, distributed into the forests all around. The territory looked to border the northern mountain chain. She saw a large section of the steep cliffs to be entirely blackened, likely years of ash collected against the mountain side.

Fire Wastes. She watched for a little longer, occasionally seeing tiny flashes. A glance down revealed movement in the distant forests, dull green forms speeding through the high trees. Explosions followed, a few kilometers away, beams of flame and light flaring up before the section stilled once more. A daily occurrence, she assumed. Machines sent through one of the many gates in the vicinity, more added with every passing day.

The gray blotch of land covered in dark clouds looked out of place. As if spewed up by a volcano in the vicinity. The forest retreated from the ash but the barrier wasn't quite as decisive as she first thought. Smaller trees and other vegetation grew far into the territory, luscious leaves while others were entirely blackened, mere husks in a graveyard of vegetation.

Ilea considered. Her locator still pointed west, straight at the wastes. It was the first Elven domain she had seen, and the downright ominous look certainly gave her pause. She could handle young elves but fighting them wouldn't be much better than simple murder. And she wasn't keen on luring out the older generation, let alone the local Oracles. She was interested in fighting either but within their territory and the chance of them ganging up on her, she didn't like her chances. Not with what she had seen from the Sky Monarch and his voiceless goon.

Circling around through the northern territories was the only option she saw, if only to find out if the key was indeed inside the wastes. But more importantly, her scheduled delving time with her two companions was coming up. Not a time to explore unknown Elven lands. Not with many of her skills still being quite a bit lower leveled than they could be. *Couldn't have been two more monasteries.*

She opened a gate to the North and stepped through. *Well, it's just pointing westward. What the hell could go wrong?*

Her allies collected, Ilea once more connected two of her portals. This time from the edge of the Meadow's territory to the depths of Karth.

The light, mana, and air change was immediately noticeable, even with all her abilities to deal with it. She wondered how she would've felt down here a few years back. Sweaty was the word that came to mind.

Fey and Kyrian readied their spells and got into position a little behind her. She was the most likely to survive a direct hit from even high level four marks after all. Vanguard by experience.

Ilea knew that Iz was still a long way's off. *I got used to all these additions to my long range teleportation*, she thought, quite excited to be back inside an extensive cave system. It reminded her of the Calys mines, the very dungeon they had entered at the start of their descent. The first cavern she had explored. Not exactly by choice either. *And now I saw the Domain from where those Elves attacked.*

She didn't find herself particularly involved. Hating Elven kind or even just the fire domain just didn't make much sense to her. She had known some of the people that had died, but not well enough to leave a deep rooted hatred towards what many considered humanity's greatest enemy. The Elves she had met, she had fought. Likely individuals who made their own choices. Uneducated and unguided. Impulse controlled teenagers with the power to destroy entire cities. Beings that had known nothing but strife since their creation. If anything it made the Cerithil Hunters more impressive.

Ilea wondered if an appearance in the Wastes and a few fights would earn some respect for humanity as a whole, but she quickly came to the conclusion that more of them would likely come east to look for a challenge. A warning system and teleportation gates were definitely more effective to deal with the occasional Elven incursion. Up until a Monarch decided to lay waste to humanity. Any by then, she hoped to be ready. If the day ever came.

She stepped forward into the dark, the gate behind her vanishing. Distant lava streams glowed lightly, pulsing with heat. Ilea jumped down a few slopes. She slid to a stop a few dozen meters farther down where she locked eyes with a horned creature. One quite a bit broader and taller than her.

[Hadranim – lvl ????]

The creature reached nearly three meters in height. Humanoid with thick arms and legs, its skin a scorched armor like substance, near entirely black. Its head resembled more a goat than a man, two beady eyes taking in the dark. Massive horns extended from its skull, half a meter in length and curved forward.

"Greetings," Ilea tried, in case the thing was a Dark One of sorts. Its level was close to one thousand.

The being crouched slightly, breathing out as veins of fire glowed on its body.

"Guess you're not one for talking," Ilea said before it charged. She raised her arms as the entire mass of the creature slammed into her. It raised her off the ground and ran on, finally crashing her into a nearby cavern wall.

Ilea looked up. "I hope you didn't think that would take me out," she said, when its large fists started to slam into her face and chest. She could feel the impacts but all her resistances and regeneration kept her body in mostly peak condition. The monster was fast, heavy, and so far used physical attacks. It was a four mark that wouldn't exactly awe most that saw it fight, and yet to an experienced adventurer, the simple make would raise a lot of flags.

Ilea started blocking and parrying blows, using her experience against the simple creature that seemed more driven by instinct than anything else. She started to notice mana intrusion with its strikes, similar in nature to her Tempered Seal. It hardly mattered. She couldn't be stunned, her heat resistance was in the third tier, and she could heal the damage done to her.

"I'll play a little with this one," she informed her allies, who quickly moved on to explore more of the cavern.

The Hadranim punched aside her arms and grabbed them, pushing one clawed foot into her armored chest before it pulled.

Ilea could feel her shoulders and arms strain but she just let the creature try. *Nothing like a good stretch after a long few days.*

It gave up when it couldn't rip out her arms and instead swung her around, stone cracked as her form impacted the ground and nearby walls time and time again. It crouched above her and resumed the direct punches.

Ilea finally teleported out, the culminating damage from its attacks getting to her organs. The issue with a four mark monster using melee attacks wasn't one of technique. The creature simply overwhelmed her own abilities much like a four mark's magic would. Her fighting skills, even with precognition, couldn't quite bridge the gap to the sheer mass, speed, and ferocity of her foe. Which meant it was a perfect sparring partner. One she would have to learn to overcome. If she didn't just want to use her fires and spells to kill it. Reverse reconstruction alone could likely take it out, with enough time and dodging.

Seems pretty durable too though, the chap. Probably not as easy a kill as some others in the same ball park.

She watched as the creature opened its maw, a bright cone of flame spreading out. Ilea walked through the magic without trouble, a few of her punches crashing into its armored chest where most of her intrusion was deflected. She dodged the followups and blocked a few attacks before it once again overwhelmed her with sheer monstrous power.

Explosions and roars resounded from another part of the cavern but it didn't much concern her, Ilea rolling through debris before she once more skidded to an upright stop. The fight reminded her of her kick-boxing days. It felt similar to facing a man with quite a bit of weight on her, anger issues, and not the best technique. Difficult, but not unbeatable. And compared to then, she had the durability of an armored war machine, and enough healing to count as some kind of saint.

The fight continued, Ilea soon avoiding more of the enemy blows. With how instinctual the creature fought, she didn't assume it would adapt. If it did, that meant thought was involved and its movements would slow down. By now they were exchanging blows. Heavy impacts resounded through the vicinity, neither of the combatants any worse for wear. Sure, there was blood on the ground, a few teeth scattered here and there, but the two continued their punches.

Ilea had switched to purely physical attacks. She could tell the beast had considerable resistance against that too but to a lesser degree than against her mana intrusion. With that she could nearly match its strength. *Punching close to the weight class of a four mark.* She once again endured a burst of flame, the spell more than anything giving her time to heal the accrued damage to her organs.

"We killed another one of them. They're rather weak against curses," Fey spoke. *"Do you wish to remain?"*

“Of course. Just go and map more of the place while I take care of this one,” Ilea said, dodging four consecutive swings before she slammed her fist into his elbow. She twirled past his extending knee, avoiding the strike before she kicked at his calf. The creature stumbled which allowed for a few more strikes, this time aimed at its spine.

She had already forgotten about her team again, entirely entranced by the battle.