

## Chapter 663 A short rest

A group of unlikely companions materialized from thin air within the domain of a crystal tree. Awe filled faces looking around at the present beings.

*“A whole gaggle. Wonderful,”* the Meadow spoke. *“I’m glad you made it out. Pursuers?”*

*“Just the one,”* Ilea said, holding up the core. *“Can I leave it in your care for a little while. Don’t damage it too much, just get rid of the metal forming around it from time to time. Or you have a hostile level eight fifty machine at your hands.”*

*“What a curious find, I will take great care of it,”* the Meadow spoke, moving the core closer with its space magic.

*Flexing, alright,* Ilea thought. *“Verena, Dragonkiller, Hereven, meet the Meadow. A good friend of mine, scholar, charismatic teacher, and protector of Hallowfort.”*

*“Calm again?”* Feyrair asked her. *“Care to tell us what happened now?”*

Iana and Christopher joined them too. *“A mind weaver?”* the woman asked.

*“Indeed... yet you do not need to fear me,”* Hereven said.

*“I don’t,”* Iana said, glancing over at the Meadow. *“What’s that sphere?”*

*“She already noticed it. Noisy enchanter. They lose respect so quickly,”* the Meadow spoke.

*“Can you inform them about everything?”* Ilea asked, looking at Verena with a tired expression.

*“Of course,”* the woman said. *“Go take a moment.”*

Ilea smiled, displacing herself closer to the Meadow. Only Feyrair would be able to come that close but he was already listening to Verena’s retelling of today’s events.

*“That close?”* the Meadow asked when she leaned against the tree.

She sighed, summoning a meal.

*“You’re safe here,”* the tree said.

*“She was stronger than you,”* Ilea sent. *“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen anything like it.”*

*“You will meet more creatures like her if you continue on the path you’ve chosen,”* the Meadow said.

*“And one day I might not be able to escape,”* she mused. *“We only got out because she underestimated us,”* she sent and paused, eating a few bites. *“I know the risks... I’ve known them since I went back into the forest after finding Riverwatch. But if a creature I fight comes and destroys everything I’ve come to love...,”*

*“Not all those you meet will be your enemies,”* the Meadow reminded her. *“You brought me here, did you not? The Baron will be by your side as well, and so will the people of Hallowfort.”*

*“I know. I just need a moment to calm down,” Ilea said. How do you even fight a creature like that? It just nullified my charged beam, stopped me from teleporting, slowed my healing, and all that in what seemed like a playful hunt.*

*“Take all the time you need. My eyes are open, my magic is prepared,” the tree said.*

She looked at the shimmering silver sphere, the metal forming at a faster pace now, likely due to the high mana density close to the Meadow. Barriers around it prevented it from taking form.

Violence appeared nearby and floated over, glancing at her before it came to rest on her hair.

They remained there for a few minutes, Ilea slowly finishing her plate before she stored it. *“She called me an abomination. Because I use both ash and healing, fire and the flames of creation.”*

*“I don’t see a reason why you shouldn’t,” the Meadow spoke.*

*Strong*

*Combination, Violence confirmed.*

*“I hope the next dragon I meet isn’t that prejudiced,” she mused.*

*“A lot of power can bolster one’s self image. It takes a lot of wisdom and reflection to remain grounded, and beings that remind one of their standing in the world,” the Meadow said.*

*Dragon*

*Bitch*

Ilea patted the Fae on top of her head, giggling to herself before the creature joined in.

Violence jumped down, landing in her palms before he pointed at her, still wearing his cape and armor.

*Ilea*

*train*

*stronger*

*slap*

*dragon*

*“I guess I have to, now that you asked me,” she said with a smile.*

*Not*

*ask*

*ORDER!*

*VIOLENCE!*

*“Yes, sir, General Baron,” Ilea replied to the giggling creature. “Where did you get that armor from anyway?”*

*Nice*

*Smith*

“Goliath, that is nice of him,” she said. “It looks good on you.”

“*Everything does, to be fair,*” the Meadow said.

The Fae looked up at the tree, tilting its head to the side.

“Your attempt remains ineffective,” Ilea mused, sliding down a little with her back to the tree. “I’m glad I met you two.”

The Fae appeared on her shoulder and hugged her face.

“I’m telling you, this tree wasn’t here the last time I came here. How could I have missed something that obvious?” Pierce asked.

Feyrair shrugged. “Your eyes are probably not the best, being human and all. I wouldn’t expect you to notice the obvious.”

“Shut it elf,” she said as lightning flared up around her.

The Meadow moved them both into a dome barrier, all the sound cut off as they went for it again.

“Just make sure to give them some privacy once they start fucking,” Ilea said, joining the group again with Violence in tow.

“Ilea, good to hear that you survived. So can we look at that core? And I assume you already know who’s missing?” Iana asked, Christopher nodding along next to her.

“I’ll get Aki shortly, don’t worry,” Ilea said.

“You recovered two additional keys,” Neiphato said.

“Yes. But I’m not quite ready to go to Iz yet. I’d like to finish up my third Class first. Maybe we can meet up with Niivalyr’s group and work through the Praetorian facility,” she answered.

“Or we could look for more of them. It will take time either way, and I’m told you’ve fought hundreds of Praetorians already. The experience won’t be as effective,” Verena said.

Ilea looked at her for a moment. *You’re rather well informed,* she thought and sighed. *Oh well, she’s seen more than even Claire by now.*

“Right, but I don’t plan to use the taleen gates for a while. Not just because of Audur,” Ilea said.

Neiphato hissed. “The Pursuer.”

“Yeah, and there could be more traps. If they decide to send a whole army after us, it won’t be quite as simple,” she said. “We know at least that our usage of the gates hasn’t gone without notice.”

“We can modify the key. But there is no way to make you completely invisible. We don’t control the network after all,” Iana said.

“I think we can just fly around for now, preferably alone. When I find something, we can go in together,” Ilea said.

“Reasonable,” Verena said. “Thank you, for not leaving us there.”

Ilea gave her a nod.

“Which means the Krahen Isles are off limits now?” Neiphato said. “You think this Audur, will be able to find it?”

“Who knows what she can do,” Ilea answered. “But I’m sure we can find a few more dungeons where you guys can train. Maybe even where the other keys are located.”

“Should we try to contact Isalthar? Or do you think it’s more reasonable for you to go to Iz alone?” Neiphato asked.

“We don’t really know what will happen. Always good to have backup. I suppose you could inform him of what’s been happening. Do you have a way to contact him or Seithir?” Ilea asked.

“Not quite as impressive as your marks, but we can leave messages in designated dungeons within the Navali forest,” Neiphato explained.

“Good. You need a lift?” she asked.

The elf smiled, his sharp teeth showing. “The gate leading to the outskirts of Ravenhall will be fine, but if you have something closer to the forest, I would not say no.”

“Sure, I do have one. But I want to make sure I can come back here, which will take a few more hours. I’ll get Aki too later on, Iana,” she said, addressing the woman.

“I shall train in that case,” Neiphato said and walked closer to the Meadow, roots forming around him in a sphere like constellation.

*“Is this, the place you have mentioned?”* Hereven asked. *“I am inclined to offer you my services for the life you have saved and returned, though I mustn’t.”*

“How about reasonable work then? When the time comes, you could help train some people. For fair compensation of course and only if you’re interested. I’ll leave the Hallowfort immigration to the Meadow and whoever is responsible upstairs,” Ilea said.

“*Compensation?*” the demon asked.

Ilea tapped her lip. “Hmm, yes. Currency or something else like food and a safe place to stay and to call your own. With currency you can buy most goods.”

*“It sounds. Acceptable,”* Hereven said. *“And yet what could I offer to one such as you?”*

“Not all humans are like me,” Ilea said. “Very few actually. Mind Weavers are masters of Mind magic. I’d love it if the Sentinels had a mental resistance trainer.”

*“You would have me... attack those that serve you?”* Hereven asked.

“I see there’s some explanation necessary,” Ilea said and quickly detailed what she meant and to what extent the demon would be employed.

*“I will inform Hereven about other opportunities to obtain currency, and about the local laws, expectations, and societal structures,”* the Meadow informed in the end. *“It will be simple, with someone receptive to my speech.”*

Ilea couldn’t quite read the demon. He had just escaped Audur’s domain, and came straight into a new place with yet another unreasonably powerful creature at its center, or so it seemed.

“*Can you make sure she won’t be able to track the demon?*” Ilea said to the Meadow.

*“I already checked. And the Baron has confirmed. None of you carry marks we may perceive, other than those given by you,”* the tree replied.

Ilea sighed. *“Sorry. Guess the experience hit me harder than expected.”*

*“To have one’s space magic taken away is to be blind and crippled. I understand better than you might think,”* the Meadow said.

*“You had something similar happen to you?”* Ilea asked, looking towards the tree.

*“No, but I can empathize,”* the tree said.

Ilea squinted at it but chose not to say anything. *Just not good enough yet, eh?* she thought with a smile and sat down near Neiphato, meditation fully flowing through her as she focused on everything but dragons.

The den of the Meadow had grown in the past months, black grass slowly spreading through the extensive cavern between Hallowfort and the Descent. Massive pillars had been erected to increase the stability of the structure sitting about two thirds down within the massive statue carved into the stone cliff below the northern stormscape.

The view wasn’t quite as impressive as from Hallowfort itself, the town sitting at the very top of the cliffs and only about a hundred meters below the cavern ceiling, and still it was impressive to behold. Crystal light flowed into the large opening the Meadow had added, its magic permeating the very walls as it slowly became a part of this territory.

And where the place had been an empty field of black grass and pillars, it had become quite lively. Goliath worked on his creations near one side of the den, his smithy sprawling out with new additions even compared to a few days prior. His ideas were mostly limited by concepts, space and durable stone easily provided by the ancient tree. Most of his work would likely not provide much practical use, but it seemed both the Meadow and the Fae could appreciate something in his art that Ilea simply couldn’t comprehend.

Perhaps she was just too human to get it, or just not old enough.

Iana and Christopher had gotten a rather extensive set of rooms with various furniture, tools, and items brought in from Ravenhall. The woman surely made use of her storage ring. Their domain was located near the wall opposite Goliath’s, both still quite a ways off the center of the Meadow, marked by its crystal tree. The intricate designs and shapes added to the housing seemed inspired by various paintings hanging on the walls inside, Ilea able to perceive them through her dominion.

There was one room she couldn’t peer inside but considering the location and lack of beds in any other areas, she could imagine what was inside, and why the enchanters chose to impose some magical privacy. She didn’t remember a time when they hadn’t been working, but she hoped the bedroom would get at least some use, if only for sleeping.

The barrier dome with Feyrair and Pierce remained active, the Meadow providing a considerably large space for them to create a continuous bloodbath.

Ilea could tell Feyrair was holding back, but she wasn’t sure how much help his dragon form would be against the ludicrously fast moving lightning and metal mage.

*“Can you make runes or enchantments that create barriers like this?”* Ilea asked. She wondered if they could be used for city defense purposes much like the one she had seen in Virilya. And to a

lesser degree as training areas for people at above level three hundred. The fight would've already severely damaged one of the underground training halls in the Sentinel Headquarters.

*“Not quite as durable as what I can make within my domain, but suitable perhaps for defensive purposes. Or to lock something inside,”* the Meadow spoke. *“Though because barriers are magical constructs, the power they require far exceed structural improvements to existing matter. Barrier mages are more efficient than any other mage at fueling such runes, but they seem rare, in Hallowfort at least.”*

*“I'd have to check with Claire. Can you not create mana crystals or something that we could fuel? You certainly have the excess power,”* Ilea suggested. *“Or maybe a way to harvest the mana here in the north.”*

*“The conditions for such creations are extremely delicate. Nor would they be stable enough to provide the mana required. For offensive purposes perhaps, as a short burst of energy, but even then, they would likely be empty very quickly,”* the being explained. *“You simply need to befriend another few of my kind.”*

*“You don't suppose you know a nephew or four who live nearby, looking for a job or fifty?”* Ilea asked.

*“Let me send out a few riders to the stars, I've been meaning to get in touch with them. Our family reunions can be a little awkward however,”* spoke the Meadow.

Ilea huffed with a smile.

*“At least we have your expertise to fall back on. Claire will want to discuss her barrier and enchantment setup for Ravenhall too, I'm sure,”* she mused. *“Don't want to overwork you either, just let me know if I'm asking too much.”*

*“How cute,”* the Meadow said, in the most condescending tone it could manage. Which was very condescending. Perfection really.

*I feel like that warrants some Mental Resistance experience,* Ilea thought, shaking her head. *“How could I ever question thine magnificence, oh wondrous tree of life.”*

*“You mammals forget easily,”* it stated.

*“I'm sure that's the issue,”* Ilea mused. She was pretty sure her cooldown to return to the den of the Meadow was back up and ready. *“I'll use the gate,”* she said and walked over to the functional creation amidst a few new gates similar in design.

*“You're much further along than I thought,”* Verena said as she joined her.

Ilea smiled. *“Yeah. They're working on it tirelessly.”*

*“You won't need the Taleen network,”* the Elder said. *“Where does this one lead?”*

*“Near Ravenhall,”* Ilea said. *“Though we'll avoid building any within actual cities.”*

*“There will have to be some,”* Verena said. *“For reinforcements in case of enemy attacks.”*

*“And if they compromise the gates?”* Ilea asked.

*“True,”* the woman said. *“It will be paramount to place them strategically.”*

Ilea nodded. "Which is why I won't be making those decisions. I'm sure the various councils will figure out where to put them."

Verena gave her a thumbs up. "Smart."

"And you wondered how I reached the five hundreds," she said and tapped her skull.

The Elder didn't seem entirely convinced, glancing at the literal thunder dome before she joined Ilea. "Pierce seems busy."

"Indeed. Ah wait, Neiphato, you wanted a lift, right?" Ilea asked.

"If it's not too much trouble," the elf said, glancing at Verena.

"We'll have to fly south for a few hours," she said, looking at the Elder. "Or you can go ahead."

"I don't mind," Verena said.

"Perfect, then let's go," Ilea answered, activating her third tier transfer as she waved at the various creatures, most of them not even noticing their departure.

"*Safe travels,*" the Meadow sent.

Violence was nowhere to be found, the mark on it unclear.

The group appeared on a hill overlooking Riverwatch, a few birds taking flight at the sudden manifestation of magic and sound.

Ilea looked to the sky, breathing a sigh of relief when no winged being showed itself. *Only a few guards and mages*, she mused, looking at the busy streets in the distance.

"They strengthened the walls," Verena observed.

Ilea looked at the fortifications. "Did they?"

*A little higher maybe?* she thought. "They should, honestly. Riverwatch may as well be the frontier of our kind by now. Next to Dawntree."

"The northern tribes deal with more monsters," Verena said. "Not as dangerous as Elves, but not by much."

Neiphato looked away and sighed.

"I didn't mean it like that," the Elder said quickly. "Few humans can fight Elves."

"I understand," Neiphato said. "I'm sorry, for whatever it's worth."

Ilea shrugged. "You didn't do anything. Let's hold the people accountable that actually come and fuck with settlements. Not a species of diverse individuals."

"Right," Verena said. "Old prejudices. Didn't think I'd ever meet an Elf who's different," she added, scratching the back of her head.

"I hope your optimism is founded in reality," Neiphato said and hissed, bowing to the two women. "Thank you, for your trust. I will call for you when I have sent the message."

“Or when you run into trouble,” Ilea said.

The elf smiled, his sharp teeth showing. “I will try to be careful,” he said and turned away, leaving a moment later.

Ilea glanced at Verena and smiled.

The Elder still gazed at the elf’s back until she noticed Ilea’s stare. “What?”