

Chapter 657 Drilling

Hey, I could use that for my cannon, Ilea thought, looking at the telescope.

“This isn’t part of another continent, is it?” she asked, looking at Verena.

The woman looked around. “Don’t think so. Cavern entrance over there,” she said and pointed.

“Good eyes. What we’re looking for is down,” Ilea said.

Pierce clicked her telescope together and made it vanish, her clothes entirely soaked in the stormy rain. “Wonderful. I am drenched,” she said and walked towards the indicated location.

The others followed.

“Is she always like that?” Ilea asked, watching the dark blue armor appear once more on the Elder’s body.

Verena nodded ever so slightly.

Ilea glanced over. “Known her long?”

“We joined the Shadows in the same month,” she said.

“How old are you two?”

Verena looked up. “I think a little over seventy. Not sure about her. Probably similar.”

“Wow, you really are Elders,” Ilea commented.

Pierce glanced back and hissed. “I heard that young lass! You’ll pay once I’m strong enough. Just you wait six hundred years!”

“We are. Lucas and Adam are older,” Verena said. “Lots of changes before. Shadows die often.”

“Too confident when you’re at this age. Gets easier and easier to make a mistake, I tell you,” Pierce said. “Complacent. Most give up the adventuring lifestyle either way. Pansies. I hope you will die a glorious death in battle, Ilea.”

“I’m immortal,” Ilea said.

“You better be,” Pierce answered. “You’re a healer. If I don’t see you come back from disintegration and loss of heads, I’ll be disappointed.”

“Dungeon. Quiet now,” Verena said as they closed in on the entrance.

Ilea was surprised to find Pierce quiet down immediately, all three of them reaching the large fissure in the dark jagged stone. She could see the bottom from the edge and jumped down, followed near instantly by the others.

No dungeon notification showed up within her mind. *Did they just bury this one somewhere out in the ocean? I suppose you certainly wouldn’t find it here without a device to locate it.*

“No signs of monsters. Continue or leave? You said you need to scout, not recover,” Verena said.

“I did say that, yes,” Ilea answered quietly. “But, I think we can push on a little bit further. If you think it’s too dangerous, you can stay up there and wait.”

“We know how much more powerful you are, Ilea. Know that we have escaped plenty of four marks. You don’t get to this age as an adventurer otherwise. Not at our level,” Pierce said and touched the stone nearby. “This is natural.”

“No way down either,” Verena said.

“Then we dig,” Ilea said, ash spreading in front of her, the vague image of a drill forming within the dark mist.

A few seconds later, they were pushing down into the stone, Ilea’s ash progressing rather slowly against the hard stone.

“You could just let Verena deal with it,” Pierce said. “This will take a while.”

“It’s quieter,” Verena said.

Ilea glanced over. “You have something like this too?”

The woman summoned two black axes lined with slightly glowing embers.

“Ah, I see,” Ilea said with a smirk.

Pierce looked at her and smiled. “That’s all she does.”

“It’s effective,” Verena said.

“I punch,” Ilea said. “Well I do a little more than that but at the end of the day, I punch.”

Verena gave her a long look and nodded slightly.

“What do you do?” Ilea asked Pierce. “Dragonkiller.”

An arc of lightning flowed over her armor. “Lightning. I always enjoyed it. Since that assassin came for me when I was eleven, ah... memories.”

“Sounds like a rough childhood,” Ilea said, their voices entirely drowned out by the drilling sounds but none of them had a problem hearing each other talk. She displaced the larger stone chunks up and away, making sure none would tumble into the ocean. Lest she wake something.

“Ah it was fine after that. I left my home on that day. My twelfth birthday was much happier. Me, Kevin, the wolves,” Pierce said.

“Do I want to hear that story?” Ilea asked.

“Nothing too peculiar. Kevin was a lightning mage too, and a goblin. We met in the wilderness and immediately understood each other. I don’t think he was much older than me to be honest, but it’s hard to tell with goblins. They’re incredibly stupid. Assassins never found me in the tunnels we dug together. Never even found out who sent them. Probably been killed themselves a year or two after all that happened,” the woman explained.

“You lived with a goblin mage in the wilderness? That sounds pretty exciting,” Ilea said offhandedly. She really wasn’t sure if any of that was true but with this world, she wouldn’t disregard the possibility.

“Unlikely, but yes. He was an outcast, like me. They’re not fond of humans otherwise. Not at all. Ah glorious was the day when we burned down his tribe together. He taught me much,” Pierce said.

“Is he still around?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t know. He wanted to go to the highest peak, to see the source of lightning. A bunch of superstitious shit, but that’s goblin education for you. I showed him the way north a few decades later and that was that,” Pierce said. “I’m sure he loved the arcane storms.”

“What was his level at the time?” Ilea asked, starting to see something within her dominion. They were coming up on familiar territory. “Taleen facility ahead.”

“Your perception goes far,” Verena said.

“Fifty? Something like that,” Pierce answered.

Ilea blinked her eyes. “Level fifty? And you sent him north?”

The woman laughed. “That Goblin had a dream, I tell you. He really wanted to go, and who am I to stop a friend.”

Sounds like you sent him to his death, Ilea thought but she didn’t know Kevin nor did she know about Pierce’s situation back then.

“Maybe someone in Hallowfort knows if he came through,” Ilea said.

“Doubt it. Finding that place is damn near impossible up there. I only got there because of the scavengers I stumbled upon more than a week’s travel eastward. Good thing too, I was about to enter Feynor territory,” Pierce said. “Unpleasant, those.”

“I’ve met them,” Ilea said.

“Managed to talk? Didn’t seem to me they like anything not resembling a dragon,” she said.

Your name doesn’t help.

“No. Well there was some talk, but they just came to kill and kidnap. Catelyn that was, and plenty of dark ones. I met Lucas there actually. An old Rhyvor city where Dark Ones took over,” Ilea said.

“They moved against Hallowfort? Seems like things are getting a little more tense up there. Maybe I should visit sometime,” Pierce said. “Nice to see that someone else knows about the ancient kingdoms in the north. Nobody wanted to believe me.”

I wonder why, Ilea thought.

“Is Lucas alive?” Verena asked.

“Yes,” Ilea said, not elaborating.

The woman nodded. “Good.” She seemed lost in thought for a moment before she talked again. “Maro. He said something about Rhyvor.”

Ilea perked up, looking at her.

“Who’s that?” Pierce asked.

“I met him in Asila. He learned that I was a Shadow and offered gold to kill monsters,” Verena explained.

“What happened?” Ilea asked, trying not to betray her connection to the man.

“A cult he stumbled upon summoned dangerous creatures. Like bats. But large. I killed them,” Verena explained.

Why would he care about a cult. Wait. Of course. And he didn't even clean up himself. Just don't start that shit in Ravenhall.

Ilea ignored the small thought in her mind that a cult of Lilith could very well be the next actor in another demon summoning. For whatever mad reason they come up with. *Claire, protect our city.*

“Breaking through,” Verena said, the group quieting down when Ilea's drill punched into the square room below.

They all appeared inside.

'ding' 'You have entered the Izacatum dungeon'

The familiar green light shined on dimly from above, ivy growing nearby and covering parts of the wall and ceiling.

Ilea's ashen drill vanished, leaving only a small opening above. They had gone deep. *Did they come from below?* she wondered, checking the nearby rooms and hallways with her dominion.

“A few guardians,” she whispered, summoning her locator before she silently continued through the door. The nearby machines collapsed before they could reach them, her reverse healing taking them out silently as her destructive mana flowed through the cracks in the doors and walls.

“What is that spell?” Verena asked in a quiet voice, her hands gripping her axes as she walked next to Ilea. Pierce had taken the rear.

“Reverse healing,” Ilea answered.

The woman nodded to herself. “Arcane... different options, I see. Good. It's silent,” she whispered.

Ilea found that the locator pointed to a location far from the only hallway they could currently access, but she wasn't too concerned. This wasn't a production facility, nor was it built by machines. There were ancient beds, furniture made of stone, dark green metal plates with dried out remains sitting on tables.

They continued in silence, trying to follow the locator as they went from room to room, Guardians taken out before they could register the intruders. Soon they came into an expansive hall, once decorated with tapestries and fountains, now decrepit and forgotten. Ancient gears still turned and clicked within the walls.

Ilea saw two Centurions stand about thirty meters away, their spears at the ready as they saw the approaching trio. She didn't use her reverse healing and instead just looked at them. *Could've tested here with Aki. Gotta go grab him later.*

She still had a location ready for her long range Transfer but decided against using it here. It was a Praetorian she wanted to get him after all. Or something even better.

“Are you telling us to take care of them?” Pierce asked.

Ilea summoned her cannon, charging just a bit of heat as she aimed. She looked at the wall left of the first machine, releasing her heat as she whipped the rifle to the right. The bright beam

illuminated the room for a split second, burning a deep furrow into the stone walls and leaving the Centurions to collapse, their cores molten and their bodies sliced in half.

“Those are level three hundred creatures,” Verena pointed out.

Pierce giggled. “What did you expect?”

Ilea smiled to herself as she walked towards the still glowing metal. *Yeah, this is fun.*

“Pointing straight forward,” she said, putting away the locator once more. The long hallway she looked at was full of traps. Normal Taleen ones she had seen many times before. Her ash armor layered, she paused and reconsidered, instead summoning her heavy wyrm armor.

Pierce whistled. “Now that... is something. How much for that piece of art?”

“I don’t plan to sell it,” Ilea answered, walking into the corridor with her ash armor moved to her back, steel spears shooting out of the walls, flames spreading out and bolts clattering against the wyrm scales without an effect. The mechanisms set within the walls mostly gave in, both the steel traps and her armor winning out against the construction.

It felt like wading through mud more so than walking through solid traps made to incapacitate or kill intruders. The flames didn’t even register, the heat gathering within her outperforming the traps by a long shot.

The Elders didn’t seem particularly impressed, simply following in silence as they walked the path prepared by her.

If they found a key down here, she would likely reveal quite a bit more about her current objectives but Ilea found herself not caring much. If anything it may help to get the input from two old adventurers firmly on the side of the Shadow’s Hand. She trusted Claire’s judgment, especially coupled with her own impression. Pierce had been right. With teleportation gates, there were a lot of uncertainties and possible political nightmares in the making. The same was true with a cooperation with Elves and an extensive conflict with the Taleen.

Bringing the attention of these ancient powers onto humanity, even if it was just her, could spell unprecedented trouble. They could use more allies and advice. Against nobles and the Golden Lily just as much as the larger factions.

They came out in a room that looked familiar to Ilea. Twelve pedestals stood spread out in a half circle, various chests and shelves lining the walls.

“Treasure,” Pierce said, not making a move to take anything.

Ilea looked around, her dominion piercing the many containers. There were a few hundred gold pieces, taleen weapons, armor, but most importantly a golden triangle lined with hundreds of enchantments sitting on one of the pedestals.

That’s too easy, Ilea thought and looked around, trying to find any traps. The only thing she found was the pressure plate the key itself sat on. She quickly made an ashen copy of the key and increased its density before she made it hover next to the pedestal. Displacement failed to bring the key to her so she walked over herself, taking the artifact before she moved her ash in place.

The mechanism hadn’t been triggered by the fast switch, Ilea weighting the artifact as she added more density to her ash, finally infusing it with mana and letting it sit there.

“That’s what you came for?” Pierce asked, walking over as she looked at the item.

Ilea noted that neither of the women had touched a single thing in the room.

“Yeah. I’ll just take the gold. Feel free to loot the rest,” she said, identifying her find.

[The Brass Key – Ancient Quality] – [Enchanted]

She glanced around, her heavy armor now covered in ash.

“You seem anxious,” Verena said, looking at a taleen war axe before placing it back down.

“Didn’t expect it to be this easy,” Ilea admitted, storing the key with a considerable chunk of mana.

“Feel like telling us what that was?” Pierce asked, sitting down on a nearby chest.

Ilea displaced the gold onto a bed of moving ash, storing everything through her connection with the element. It came out to about three hundred and forty pieces. Not too impressive compared to her wealth. To a normal adventurer however it would be an exorbitant sum.

“I’m not entirely sure if I can trust you two with that information,” Ilea answered, herself now looking through the artifacts, mostly searching for interesting magical items. She didn’t find anything. “You’re aware of the Cerithil Hunters?”

Let’s see how they react to a few pieces.

The two looked at each other. Verena answered. “Yes. They are Elves that go into dungeons. I met one that did not try to kill me.”

“They’re the only ones that don’t attack humans on sight. I’m pretty damn sure about that,” Pierce said. “A good thing too because many many more would’ve died in the numerous conflicts if we didn’t have the dungeons to hide in.”

“The Taleen built the Guardians and more advanced machines to hunt and kill Elves. At this point it doesn’t seem like the dwarves are still around, but the machines haven’t stopped. On the contrary. More invade the Elven domains every year,” Ilea explained.

Pierce glanced at her and smirked. “So it’s true,” she murmured. “You’re working together with them.”

“I’m helping out a few friends. They just happen to be Elves,” Ilea said, gauging their reactions.

Verena took in a deep breath, the grip on her axes increasing before she relaxed again.

“Even if we wanted to stop you, we can’t,” Pierce said. “I’m highly curious though... to meet these creatures who think so little of our kind. So little in fact that they do not even invade our lands.”

“They invaded enough,” Verena said.

“Ah we talked about that many times, Verena. You know they could wipe us out entirely if they so wished. Or so I think?” she said, glancing at Ilea.

“I was attacked by a Monarch. The male leader of the Sky Domain. He was a four mark being,” she said.

Pierce whistled. “Yeah, that’ll do it. I alone could wipe out a few cities. A four mark... that’s entirely different,” she said and laughed.

“Don’t joke about that,” Verena said.

“Ah, you take these things too seriously. There are forces in the world we don’t understand. Not yet. Nor is it wise to challenge them. Can you kill the ones you’ve allied yourself with?” Pierce asked.

Ilea considered. “I trust three of them fully. There is one. One I’m not sure I could kill. But I’m working on my ability to challenge not just him but the Monarchs too.”

The woman giggled. “Do you at all feel a responsibility that comes with bringing their attention onto our humble lands and peoples?”

“It’s not certain what will happen. The Monarch hasn’t come to kill me yet, nor have there been Elves invading our cities. But if my actions lead to something like that, I’ll do what I can to stop them,” she said.

“Hah, she’s like you,” Pierce said, glancing at Verena. “I just want to meet them because it sounds intriguing. Elves. There are records that tell of alliances in the past, did you know that?”

Ilea nodded. “I’ve heard of one, yes.”

“And what could bring such ancient and beastly creatures to ally themselves with humanity?” she asked, the tone of her voice suggesting a rhetorical question.

“Bigger monster,” Verena said.

“Probably. Either that or we were more powerful in the past. Hence the northern kingdoms. The Elves would’ve spread and taken our lands by now if they reproduced quite as diligently as we do. Perhaps it’s the Taleen that keep them from expanding. Or they need more mana density our lands can’t provide. So what’s the goal of those friends of yours?” Pierce asked.

“To stop the machines. That’s what the Cerithil Hunters have been trying for centuries,” Ilea answered. *They don’t seem too opposed.*

“Now that... is interesting,” Pierce said with a wide grin. “How extensive is the danger these machines pose to the Elven... Domains you said?”

Ilea thought about it. “Honestly... I can’t really see even an Executioner killing that Monarch. But according to the Elves I know, a lot of their young are killed by the Taleen.”

“Oh... yes. The chaos that would ensue... from the removal of this threat... ah I can see it,” Pierce said and spread her arms. “Wonderful. Ah, and here I thought the teleportation gate idea would shatter our status quo... but this... this could ripple far beyond humanity alone. Verena, what do you think?”

“It’s dangerous,” the woman said, a slight grin on her face.

“Two Elders of the Shadows Hand, fighting alongside Lilith, the hidden queen of Ravenhall. Ah how the bards and historians will write and sing of our deeds. If they’re still alive to spin their tales at all. Ilea... I think it’s fair to say that I’m interested in this endeavor. It may prove a wonderful stepping stone towards my dragon hunt. Even though we can’t offer much to you in battle, as you are quite... ludicrously powerful, we do have friends and favors ready to be collected, all throughout the human lands.”